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NATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

“RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP”



13TH SESSION OF WORKING GROUP 1

**AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
(CHAPTER 11)**

On September 25, 2025, the 13th session of Working Group 1 – Agriculture and Rural Development (Chapter 11) under the National Convention on the European Union in North Macedonia (NCEU-MK) gathered Macedonian and Slovak experts, young farmers, academics, and civil society representatives to discuss “Rural Development and Opportunities for Youth in Entrepreneurship.” Participants agreed that young people remain a crucial but underutilized force in rural transformation, with migration, limited access to finance, and weak infrastructure continuing to threaten the future of agriculture.





Mileva GJUROVSKA

National Coordinator of NCEU-MK, Professor at Institute for Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, "University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius", Skopje, President of European Movement EMMK

At the 13th session of Working Group 1 on Agriculture and Rural Development, Professor Mileva Gjurovska, emphasized the importance of empowering rural youth, dialogue, and continuity in the EU integration process. She highlighted the inclusiveness and stability of NCEU-MK's working groups, which continue to attract new participants and foster democratic dialogue. Supported by the Slovak Ministry of Agriculture, the working group has produced four volumes of expert recommendations, strengthened by cooperation with Slovak experts like Ivana Uličná, who share EU best practices in rural development.

Focusing on the theme of rural development and youth entrepreneurship, Gjurovska discussed the sociological challenges of generational change, noting that young people increasingly seek alternatives to traditional farming. She called for policies that integrate innovation, education, and opportunity to make rural life more appealing. Acknowledging that these challenges are more severe in candidate countries, she cited the EU's Common Agricultural Policy as a model for revitalizing rural economies. Stressing the non-partisan nature of the NCEU-MK, Gjurovska described it as a space for inclusion and professional dialogue, uniting over 3,000 participants across 67 sessions. She concluded by thanking Slovak partners and introducing Iveta Hricová, the new Slovak ambassador and supporter of North Macedonia's EU path.

Ambassador Hricová delivered a warm and focused address that highlighted the importance of agriculture as both an economic backbone and cultural foundation for North Macedonia.

She emphasized that aligning agricultural policies with EU standards is not merely a bureaucratic obligation but a transformative opportunity. "It is a real opportunity for your country for sustainable growth, modernization, and competitiveness," she said.

Drawing on Slovakia's own experience as a former EU candidate, Hricová noted that her country understands both the challenges and opportunities of the integration process. This perspective, she explained, is what drives Slovakia's active participation in the National Convention on the European Union (NCEU-MK), not only through financial support but through the sharing of expert knowledge.

The Ambassador stressed that young people are the lifeblood of rural communities, serving as catalysts for innovation and renewal. Empowering them, she said, is key to building resilient economies and vibrant societies.

"By empowering young farmers and entrepreneurs, we can help foster rural economies that create jobs, improve livelihoods, and contribute to social cohesion," she stated.

Hricová commended the NCEU-MK for dedicating this session to youth entrepreneurship, noting that discussions like these are essential to identify challenges, exchange experiences, and shape practical policy recommendations.

These recommendations, she added, will help North Macedonia develop an environment where young entrepreneurs can thrive, contributing to both rural development and European integration goals.

She also announced Slovakia's continued commitment to joint initiatives aimed at strengthening rural infrastructure, improving agricultural education, and supporting youth-led entrepreneurship. "We remain committed to continuing this very close partnership with your beautiful country," she said.

Ending on a personal note, Ambassador Hricová expressed her admiration for the dedication shown by Macedonian experts, farmers, and young innovators. "Through our cooperation," she said, "we will pave the way for a prosperous, sustainable future for this country and its rural communities."



Iveta HRICOVA

Ambassador of Slovak Republic in the Republic of North Macedonia

Iveta Hricová, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to North Macedonia, reaffirmed Slovakia's unwavering support for the country's EU accession and its efforts to modernise agriculture through youth entrepreneurship.

“Young people are the lifeblood of rural communities and the driving force behind innovation and renewal,” said Ambassador Iveta Hricová.



Aleksandra MARTINOVSKA STOJCHESKA

Coordinator of Working Group 1,
Professor, Faculty of Agricultural
Sciences and Food, Institute of
Agroeconomics, UKIM - Skopje

Professor Aleksandra Martinovska-Stojcheska, coordinator of the working group and professor at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food at UKIM, set the tone for a discussion deeply rooted in optimism and urgency.

“This topic is emotional,” she began. “Because how is the sector going to look without young people, without the future?” Her words resonated across the room of experts, farmers, students, and policymakers gathered to discuss *Rural development and opportunities for youth in entrepreneurship*.

Martinovska-Stojcheska reminded participants that the National Convention on the European Union in North Macedonia (NCEU-MK) has been active since 2017, fostering open dialogue and evidence-based policymaking across multiple fields. Over eight years and thirteen sessions, the agriculture working group has tackled issues from EU funding and accreditation to climate change, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and innovation in agricultural knowledge systems.

As the group’s experience deepened, so did its recognition of a shared challenge: keeping young people in rural communities. “This is perhaps the most important topic we’ve ever covered,” she said, underscoring that youth engagement is central to the sustainability of the sector.

The professor recalled how the EU’s *Vision for Rural Areas by 2040* places youth, entrepreneurship, and digitalization at its core. Yet, she noted, these same priorities echo the challenges in the Western Balkans from bureaucratic red tape and limited profitability to gender gaps and lack of access to basic services.

“With more than 12% of agricultural economies led by young people in the EU,” she observed, “our region faces the same struggles, though often under more difficult conditions.” She announced that the EU’s long-awaited Strategy on Generational Renewal is expected later this year and will be shared with the convention’s members once published.

For this reason, the session was designed to bring together policy experts and young farmers, ensuring that the discussion reflects both analysis and lived experience. The first panel, she explained, would present findings from a comprehensive study on youth entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans, followed by contributions from young producers themselves.

Martinovska-Stojcheska emphasized that every NCEU-MK session culminates in policy recommendations, which are communicated to national institutions and often inform real decision-making. “They are taken seriously,” she said. “And that is a measure of our impact.” She took a moment to recognize the presence of Ambassador Iveta Hricová of Slovakia, thanking her for her partnership and wishing her success in her mandate. Slovakia, she added, has been a key partner in helping align North Macedonia’s rural development policies with EU standards.

Her closing message was clear: the country’s agricultural future depends on empowering young people to lead it. “We could not have convened such a session without bringing in young people,” she said. “They are not just the topic of discussion, they are its purpose.”

“How is the sector going to look without young people, without the future?” asked Professor Aleksandra Martinovska-Stojcheska.

Emelj TUNA

Professor, Faculty of Agricultural
Sciences and Food, Institute of
Agroeconomics, UKIM - Skopje



For the first time, North Macedonia hosted the presentation of a comprehensive regional study on rural youth, offering an evidence-based picture of the challenges and opportunities facing young people in agriculture across the Western Balkans.

The study, prepared by SPG, FAO, and regional experts, was introduced by Professor Emelj Tuna of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food at UKIM during the 13th session of the National Convention on the European Union in North Macedonia (NCEU-MK).

Professor Tuna explained that the research represents the first integrated analysis of youth in rural environments in the region, covering issues of education, employment, gender equality, and participation in policymaking. “Our goal was to draft evidence-based policies that empower rural youth as both current and future policymakers,” he said.

Drawing from over 2,000 interviews across six Western Balkan countries, the study combined quantitative data with focus group insights. It found that 46% of the region's population, some 8.2 million people, live in rural areas, yet rural depopulation continues at an alarming rate.

Low birth rates, poor infrastructure, and weak social protection systems are among the key drivers of the decline. "Each year, the Western Balkans lose the equivalent of a mid-sized town to migration," Tuna warned, noting that many of those leaving are well-educated young families.

Young people aged 15 to 29 representing roughly 21% of the total population are particularly affected by the lack of quality education, digital connectivity, and dignified employment opportunities. Without intervention, the professor cautioned, "migration and brain drain will continue, deepening demographic and agricultural decline."

The study also highlighted gender disparities that limit women's participation in agriculture. In many rural communities, cultural norms and unequal inheritance practices prevent women from owning land or starting businesses. "In some parts of the region, daughters are still expected to give up their share of land," Tuna noted, quoting one respondent who said, "Women are born for other people's homes."

Among young people who remain in rural areas, frustration is growing. Poor access to transport, limited extracurricular activities, and the absence of kindergartens or health services drive many to leave. In focus groups, participants in North Macedonia echoed their regional peers, pointing to unstable markets and bureaucratic barriers as key obstacles for new farmers.

The research found that agriculture remains a primary source of income in rural areas, but is perceived as low-status and low-reward, deterring new entrants. Many young people aspire instead to work in public administration or move abroad for better education and jobs.

Despite these challenges, Tuna emphasized that innovation and entrepreneurship hold the key to revitalizing rural economies. The study calls for better-targeted youth policies, improved vocational training, and inclusion of young people in decision-making. Encouragingly, several Western Balkan countries are introducing youth guarantee funds to support these goals by 2025.

In closing, Professor Tuna urged policymakers to view young people not as a problem but as a transformative force for the region's agricultural future. "Young people in rural areas are key for the future of rural communities and agriculture," he said. "Without them, there is no renewal."

"Each year, the Western Balkans lose the equivalent of a mid-sized town to migration," warned Professor Emelj Tuna.

Ana SIMONOVSKA

NCEU-MK Expert, Professor,
Faculty of Agricultural Sciences
and Food, Institute of
Agroeconomics, UKIM - Skopje



Professor Ana Simonovska, NCEU-MK expert and researcher at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food, shed new light on an often-overlooked question: *why do some young people choose to stay in rural areas?*

Building on the regional study presented earlier by Professor Emelj Tuna, Simonovska explored the psychological and social dimensions of migration, examining both the drivers of youth departure and the motivations for those who remain. Her contribution added a human perspective to the demographic data shaping rural development policy.

"Demographic ageing and youth migration are global trends," she noted, "but what we sometimes forget is that attachment to home, family, and community can be just as strong as the urge to leave." Simonovska explained that rural depopulation leads not only to economic decline but also to the loss of cultural identity and social fabric.

Across the Western Balkans, she said, the patterns of migration differ by gender. In North Macedonia, rural abandonment is more pronounced among women, while in Albania men tend to migrate more for work abroad. In other countries, young people often leave for better education, cultural life, or health services, rather than purely economic reasons.

Her research identified two main forces shaping these decisions: inertia and attachment. Many young people, she explained, stay not only for convenience but out of emotional ties and comfort with traditional life. "Remaining in one's birthplace is not necessarily a lack of ambition," she said. "It can also be a choice rooted in identity, habit, and family belonging."

Such examples, she argued, demonstrate that youth entrepreneurship in rural areas is not only about business but about preserving traditions and creating new value chains. Yet many challenges persist:

limited access to land, restrictive inheritance customs, and lack of capital continue to discourage young people from engaging in agriculture.

Despite these obstacles, Simonovska detected signs of optimism, particularly among young people in North Macedonia who aspire to run their own businesses, even if not directly tied to farming. “They want to innovate around agriculture, not escape it,” she observed.

However, she warned that distrust in institutions and lack of civic participation remain serious barriers. Many young people across the region, she said, “do not trust the media, the justice system, or political parties,” and feel that their voices are rarely heard in policymaking.

For Simonovska, supporting those who stay is as crucial as understanding those who leave. “To be a young entrepreneur in this country is difficult,” she concluded. “That is why we must recognize the courage of those who choose to remain and invest in their future.”

“Remaining in one’s birthplace is not a lack of ambition it can be a choice rooted in identity, habit, and belonging,” said Professor Ana Simonovska.



Ivana ULIČNÁ

Founder of Hekima, Senior Expert at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava, Slovak Republic

Ivana Uličná, founder of Hekima and senior expert at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, shared Slovakia’s innovative approach to tackling youth disengagement from rural life and agriculture.

Speaking via video link, Uličná described how her organization, Hekima, works with the Slovak Ministry of Education to place entrepreneurship and innovation at the heart of secondary education. The goal, she said, is to help young people see rural development not as a dead end, but as a landscape of opportunity.

Her presentation centered on Practice Enterprise 2.0, an upgraded model of the long-running EU educational concept that simulates running a real company in a classroom setting. In Slovakia, the program now operates across 180 secondary schools, giving students hands-on experience in innovation, business, and sustainability.

“The traditional model taught young people how to be good employees,” Uličná explained. “But what employers told us they needed were people with creativity, responsibility, and problem-solving skills. So we redefined the whole approach.”

Instead of running simulated businesses that sell candles or bracelets, students in the new program use the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to identify and solve real social and environmental problems in their communities. Through board games, simulations, and competitions, they learn to design ventures that contribute to climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy, or circular economy solutions.

This “risk-free environment,” as Uličná described it, allows students to test business ideas without financial danger, a particularly valuable opportunity for rural youth with limited access to resources. The program has already produced student enterprises that went on to become real businesses.

Highlighting examples from both Slovakia and North Macedonia, Uličná told the story of Countryside Farm in Rankovce, founded by Maria Duda, who returned from New York to create a therapeutic animal farm employing women from Roma communities. Another young entrepreneur developed a mushroom incubator, turning local produce into niche products like teas and eco-friendly fertilizers.

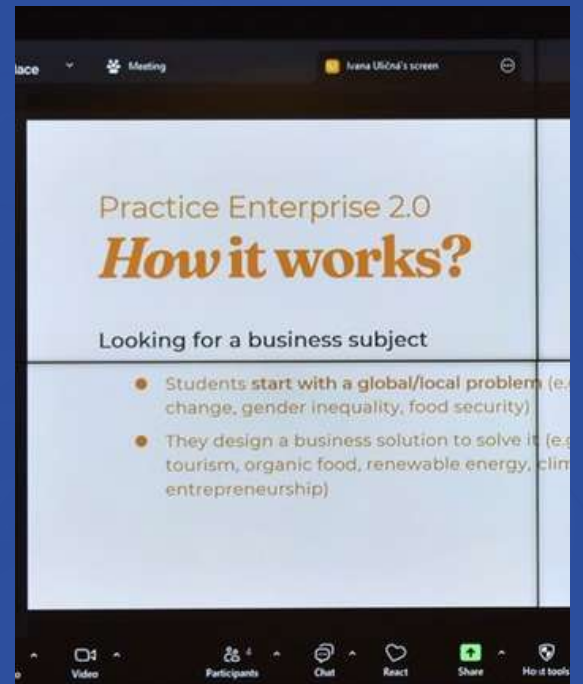
“These are the kinds of examples that show what can happen when young people are given systems that help them think differently,” she said. “When they learn to see ‘nothing in the village’ as a business opportunity rather than a reason to leave.”

Uličná emphasized that the Practice Enterprise approach aligns perfectly with EU policies on generational renewal, rural innovation, and sustainability, all central to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). She argued that governments should integrate such models into broader youth employment and rural development strategies.

Beyond skills, she stressed values: innovation, inclusion, and responsibility. “We’re not just teaching business we’re building citizens who notice problems in their communities and have the tools to solve them,” she said.

In closing, Uličná urged policymakers to focus on creating incentives for young people to return to rural areas through access to finance, housing, or even simple information about available support. Women, she added, must be part of this process, as they represent “half of our population’s untapped potential.”

“Where others see nothing in the village, young people must learn to see opportunity,” said Ivana Uličná.





**Maja
LAZARESKA JOVESKA**

Head of the EU Department,
Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry
and Water Economy

The second panel of the 13th session of the National Convention on the European Union in North Macedonia (NCEU-MK) on Agriculture and Rural Development shifted the focus from policy to practice, showcasing young farmers who are redefining rural life through innovation, resilience, and entrepreneurship.

The second panel was moderated by Maja Lazareska Joveska, Head of the EU Department at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, who brought both expertise and structure to the discussion. Having also served as Co-chair during the latter part of the first panel, she seamlessly transitioned into her role as moderator for the second session, guiding the debate with professionalism and clarity. Lazareska Joveska provided valuable insights on aligning national agricultural policies with EU standards, encouraged participants to share practical experiences, and ensured that the dialogue remained focused on concrete challenges and solutions within the field of rural and agricultural development. Her balanced approach and deep understanding of EU integration processes helped maintain a productive and engaging exchange among all participants. She introduced the second panel speakers in the following order:



**Biljana
PETROVSKA
MITREVSKA**

Project Manager, National
Federation of Farmers

Biljana Petrovska-Mitrevska, project manager at the **National Federation of Farmers (NFF)**, opened the panel by linking local realities to European policy. She explained that under the **EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027**, member states must dedicate at least **3% of their agricultural budgets to young farmers**, supporting both new start-ups and the development of existing farms.

“Not everything is rosy in the EU,” Petrovska-Mitrevska noted. “Only 12% of farmers are under the age of 40, and just 4% are women.” Her message set the tone for the discussion, that supporting young people in agriculture is not only a Macedonian priority, but a European one.

The panel then turned to the stories of four young producers who embody this mission in practice.

Goran BALEVSKI

Young Farmer, Graduate
Agronomist, Founder of the
Organic Cooperative “B-Organic”,
Valandovo



Goran Balevski, a graduate agronomist from Valandovo, described himself as part of the “first generation of organic farmers” in the country. His cooperative, **B-Organic**, founded in 2019 by a group of 14 young enthusiasts, produces certified organic almonds under the brand *Organic*. “We’re pioneers in organic farming,” Balevski said proudly. “We grow, process, and educate others, it’s more than production, it’s a movement.”

Natalija KIROVSKA

Young Beekeeper and Graduate
economist - “Kirovski
Beekeeping”, Kočani



Natalija Kirovska, a young economist from Kočani, introduced **Kirovski Beekeeping**, a family business with over **200 beehives** producing certified organic honey and handmade honey-based products. “We’ve expanded our production, and every year more clients recognize our quality,” she said. “Beekeeping is not just tradition, it’s our future.”

Ivan DODEVSKI

Young Beekeeper - “Dodevski
Beekeeping”, Member of the NFF
and the beekeeping association
“Matica”, Skopje



Ivan Dodevski, another beekeeper and member of the NFF, spoke about the evolution of his family business, **Dodevski Beekeeping**, which now manages over **500 hives** and operates both online and in physical shops. “Climate change has forced us to adapt,” he said. “We’ve diversified our products and created a recognizable brand known for high quality.”



Jovanče PARMACHKI

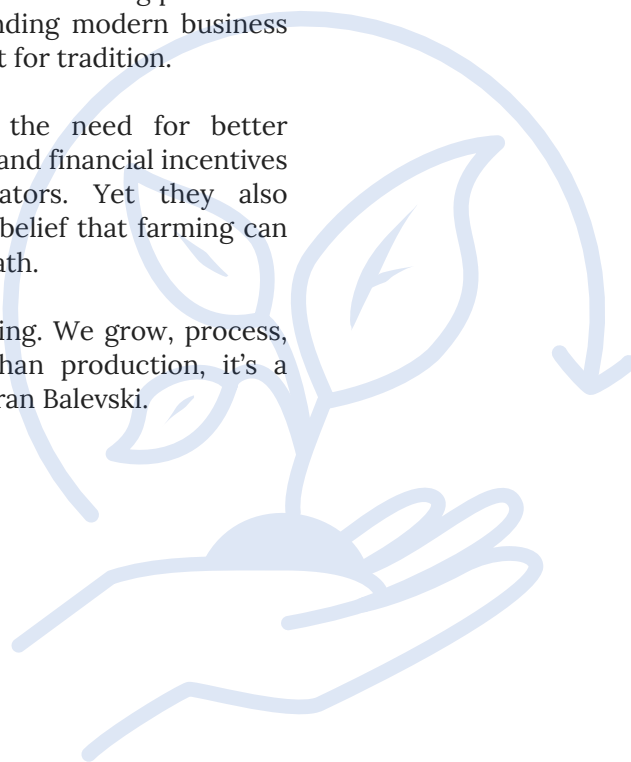
Young Sheep Breeder -
"Parmački Farm", Budinarci,
Berovo

From Berovo, Jovanče Parmachki, a computer engineer turned farmer, presented a more traditional but equally inspiring story. His family's Parmački Farm maintains over 600 sheep and is dedicated to preserving the art of domestic cheese-making. "Our goal is to protect the family tradition and make it stronger," he said. "We want to grow without losing who we are."

Together, these young farmers offered a living portrait of rural entrepreneurship, each blending modern business methods with deep-rooted respect for tradition.

Their experiences underscored the need for better infrastructure, access to markets, and financial incentives to support young rural innovators. Yet they also conveyed optimism and a shared belief that farming can once again be a desirable career path.

"We are pioneers in organic farming. We grow, process, and educate others. It's more than production, it's a movement," said young farmer Goran Balevski.



The second panel of the 13th session of WG 1 closed with an energetic and candid discussion between young farmers, government representatives, and development partners. The exchange revealed both the frustrations and hopes of the country's next generation of rural entrepreneurs.

Moderated by Maja Lazareska Joveska and Biljana Petrovska Mitrevska, the discussion gathered young producers Goran Balevski, Natalija Kirovska, Ivan Dodevski, and Jovanče Parmachki, joined later by officials from the Agricultural Payment Agency and Ministry of Agriculture.

The debate opened with a reality check. “Rural communities don't have a prospective future,” said Balevski. “Young people are leaving because support is too little, too late, and too slow.” He described how bureaucratic procedures often delay agricultural subsidies for years, undermining motivation. “By the time we receive the answer, sometimes two or three years have passed,” he said.

Kirovska echoed this concern, stressing that credit restrictions are among the toughest barriers for young farmers. “We need new investments not only to start, but to sustain our work,” she said. She also called for better visibility of funding opportunities and training on how to apply. “Many of us work in remote areas and miss important information,” she added.

For beekeeper Ivan Dodevski, information gaps and infrastructure remain critical. He urged the state to distinguish between *young farmers* and *beginner farmers*, arguing that experience and age should not be conflated in subsidy design. “We've been in beekeeping for 20 years, but we still face the same financial barriers,” he said, pointing to the lack of loans tailored for small producers.

Jovanče Parmachki, a young sheep breeder from Berovo, called for more timely subsidies and local access to administrative services. “We can't submit documents in our own municipalities,” he said. “Everything goes to Skopje, and it's a huge burden.” He emphasized the need for modern equipment and digital procedures to simplify applications and ensure fairer access.

Representatives from the Agricultural Payment Agency acknowledged the bottlenecks but highlighted progress. They reported a sixfold increase in applications from young farmers in 2025 compared to 2023 and pointed to new measures offering 40% prepayments and higher support for cooperatives. Still, they admitted that limited staff capacity slows down implementation.

The dialogue also explored why young people stay in farming despite these challenges. “It's about identity and family,” said Parmachki. “We want to modernize but keep our traditions.” Dodevski added that owning something creates motivation: “When it's yours, you care for it.”

Participants agreed that association and cooperation are key to strengthening young farmers' voices. Drawing inspiration from Slovenia's model, where youth cooperatives play a major advisory role, Petrovska Mitrevska and NGO representatives urged Macedonian farmers to “organize collectively and advocate as one.”

Slovak expert Ivana Uličná rejoined the discussion to explain how education can fuel entrepreneurship. She encouraged North Macedonia to adopt Slovakia's Practice Enterprise methodology, a simulation-based training program for youth innovation within secondary education and adult learning.

As the meeting wrapped up, Professor Mileva Gjurovska, who chaired the session, praised the openness of the debate. “This time, young people didn't just speak about policies they shaped them,” she said. She confirmed that all ideas voiced during the panel would be compiled into formal policy recommendations for the Ministry of Agriculture.

“By the time we receive the answer, sometimes two or three years have passed,” said young farmer Goran Balevski, highlighting the frustration with slow support processes.

