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Production and Consumption of Organic Food in the Republic of Bulgaria - Problems and Prospects

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Abstract. **Abstract: The article examines the trends and prospects for the production of organic food in the agricultural sector in the Republic of Bulgaria in the short and long term, as well as the problems faced by producers of organic food and organic products in a national and pan-European perspective. The production of organic food in the agricultural sector of the Republic of Bulgaria lags significantly behind compared to other countries. It represents only 2.3% of the total agricultural production of the country. At the same time, the Republic of Bulgaria, both in terms of climate, soils, and the degree of preservation of natural ecosystems, is extremely favorable for the development of organic agriculture and production of organic food in the agricultural sector. By offering relatively healthier food products and by protecting the environment, the production of organic food in the agricultural sector works in the interests of consumers. The production of organic food and organic products aims to support the health of consumers and is beneficial to the entire society.**

Keywords—improving environmental sustainability, organic food production, shortening organic food supply chains, supply chain control

INTRODUCTION

The production of organic food in the agricultural sector, both on a global and pan-European scale, has grown extremely rapidly in recent decades at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. This increase is caused by a complex of factors, among which the leading ones are:

- the aspiration of more and more people towards healthier eating;
- the desire of people in developed countries to consume better quality and more complete foods;
- the desire of more and more people to reduce the consumption of foods that have been treated with plant protection preparations and other chemical agents due to the appearance of allergies and other health problems;
- the attempt to limit the production and sale of genetically modified agricultural products;
- the desire of more and more people for an environmentally friendly lifestyle and diet.

The production of organic food in the agricultural sector in the Republic of Bulgaria at the current stage of development of the Bulgarian agriculture significantly lags behind both in European and global terms. At the same time, the demand for organic food in the commercial network and in the network of local farmers' markets in the Republic of Bulgaria is constantly growing. Currently, demand for organic foods is outpacing supply. This is the reason why the areas sown with agricultural organic products or used for organic animal husbandry are constantly increasing and at a rapid pace. The last two years are an exception, when these areas decreased by 20%. This decrease is in 2023 compared to 2021. The reasons for this decrease are complex. First of all, the political instability during this time period can be pointed out as a reason. Secondly, a serious reason is the strengthening of bureaucratic requirements and changes in regulatory measures. Thirdly, we can point out the effects of the Covid-pandemic, which affect both the production and consumption of organic food in Bulgaria.

In terms of growth rate, organic production in Bulgaria in the last two decades has seen a relatively rapid development. These high rates of growth of the areas for

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the production of organic food put our country in seventh place in the world in terms of the increase of the areas on which plant crops and breeding animals are grown according to the requirements for organic production, according to data from research by [4]. Despite the rapid pace of development, organic agriculture and the production of organic food, in particular, in the Republic of Bulgaria are still lagging behind both in comparison with other European countries and in relation to the dynamics of consumption growth.

In practice, a large part of the organic foods sold in Bulgaria are imported from other countries. Taking into account the fact that, according to the assessment of the former Minister of Agriculture and Food in the Republic of Bulgaria, only 5% of the food offered in the commercial network in Bulgaria was produced in the country. In this modest 5%, the relative share of organic foods of agricultural origin is even smaller [18]. The production of organic food in the agricultural sector of the Republic of Bulgaria represents only 2.3% of the country's total agricultural production. In parallel, a significant part of this production is aimed at export, because biofoods are in high demand on international markets. Organic foods are sold at higher prices and provide better profitability compared to foods that do not have the characteristics and status of organic foods.

In contrast to the recent past, when food production in the agricultural sector mainly pursued quantitative results, today more and more attention is paid to the quality of food and to the formation of sustainable food systems in the context of the European and national orientation towards the development of "green economy'.

It can be summarized that the Republic of Bulgaria in many respects has a good potential for the production of organic food. This potential is manifested in the following conditions and facts, which turn Bulgaria into a unique producer for some of the organic foods, which occupy an increasingly large share in the consumer basket of Bulgarian and European citizens [11].

First of all, the favorable climate for the production of agricultural products can be highlighted;

In the second place, a factor strengthening the potential for organic food production in Bulgaria, we can place the good traditions in the field of agrarian food production, mainly in the sectors of fruit growing, vegetable production, game and fish farming, beekeeping and mushroom growing;

The third most important factor forming the potential for biofood production is the relatively preserved and clean nature as a result of deindustrialization;

A fourth factor, in this regard, is the transition from a conventional to a "green economy", where organic food production is an essential component of the European Union's green strategy.

The fifth factor is the development of specialized small farms, which try to offer their ecologically clean agrarian products on the local markets and even supply some of the large commercial chains in Bulgaria.

Sixth in order, but no less significant factor, are the "fashionable" trends in nutrition, in which organic foods are becoming more and more desirable and more and more sought after not only by paying buyers, but even by mass average consumers of quality food.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Publications in the specialized literature, as well as data from specialized Internet sites, will be the priority source of data for this presentation. I will try to summarize, systematize and organize data on the production and consumption of organic foods in the Republic of Bulgaria. The National Statistics Office in the Republic of Bulgaria does not publish separate data on the production and consumption of organic foods. They are included in the data on general agricultural production and consumption. This makes it difficult to provide detailed and systematized data on this market segment in the Bulgarian economy.

The priority method that I have used as an author is the Specialized Literature Review Method. In principle, this method involves a precise search, evaluation and summary of scientific evidence from existing studies, scientific reports and academic articles related to the topic of this study. This is a good method for detecting and specifying deficits in existing knowledge in this subject area.

The method of content analysis of some of the existing publications on the topic of the production and consumption of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria was also used by the author.

The study also uses a comparative analysis of data from similar studies, to the extent that the existing information base on the problem under consideration allows. The comparative characteristics of the production and consumption of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria allow us to more clearly identify the trends and prospects for the country in these processes. “The comparative analysis as method is used to compare the situation in different types of agricultural holdings within Bulgaria. It helps to contextualize the findings and understand the relative performance or characteristics of the subject of study” [10]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Advantages and specifics of organic food production in the agricultural sector

Let's start with the definition of organic foods or "bioproducts". "Organic products in the EU are produced and tested in accordance with environmental protection and animal welfare standards... The idea of organic certification is to give guarantees for clean and natural food, especially in big cities, where tracing the origin of food is difficult and personal contact with producers is often impossible. There are strict regulations regarding the labeling of organic

products. Among them are listing the exact composition and origin of all input raw materials, country of production and certification authority" [17].

Another distinction that consumers often do not make is the difference between organic foods and organic products and organic foods and organic products. Also in specialized literature, the term "organic foods" is used as a synonym for organic foods. Similarly, eco-agriculture is used as a synonym for organic agriculture.

Eco foods (environmental foods), on the other hand, are a product of agricultural production and natural extraction from ecologically clean areas. It is about production in areas with unpolluted soils, air and water. When extracting the raw materials used for the production of ecological foods, ecologically clean areas are also taken into account - flat, hilly or mountainous. Most often, eco products are raw materials and foods of plant or animal origin collected from nature.

Unlike organic products (organic food and organic raw materials), which are grown in specialized conditions of organic farming and go through a series of tests to guarantee and certify their organic origin, (in case they meet all regulatory requirements and conditions), for eco food products do not have such a strict requirement for production control and monitoring. For them, it is sufficient to prove that the terrain or the area from which they were produced or mined is ecologically clean - it is far from industrial and natural pollutants, from mining and ore mining activities or busy infrastructural transport arteries.

But in order for a food product or raw material to be declared and distributed as eco food, its origin from an ecologically clean area must be guaranteed.

As noted in publications that compare organic food and organic food, there are no significant differences between eco and organic food. Both organic foods and eco foods are grown under conditions that guarantee their maximum natural, natural origin without the use of chemicals and synthetic materials. As chemicals that are used as a result of harmful human intervention in the literature, the following are indicated: "synthetic pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics, hormones, chemical fertilizers, GMOs, preservatives, addition of artificial flavors, colors and flavorings" [16].

Another common synonym for organic food is the term "organic" food. Organic food in specialized publications is defined as "food grown without the help of genetic engineering, pesticides, soil conditioners and other synthetic substances. These foods have a proven higher content of vitamins and trace elements, and their extraction and processing are more environmentally friendly. Bulgarian organic foods are mainly fruits, nuts, herbs and spices, as well as organic vegetable oils, tobacco, vegetables, meat, jam and honey" [21].

In Irena Stefanova's opinion, "the terms organic, ecological or biofood mean the same thing - food grown without the help of genetic engineering, pesticides, soil enhancers and other synthetic substances to protect it from insects or low yield" [13].

The question arises, why do we have three different names and specifications for the same thing in the Bulgarian language? It is probably a matter of translations of terminology from different languages, because all three names are neologisms in the Bulgarian language. The other assumption is that perhaps there is a ratio of parts to whole. Perhaps the broadest concept is ecological foods. Any food centuries ago, when chemical means of plant protection - pesticides, herbicides and insecticides - were not yet known, was practically ecological. The second degree of narrowing is organic foods, they are undoubtedly ecologically clean, but they can be grown by different producers, even if they are not certified. The smallest is the subset of organic foods in this complex. The special thing about them is that they must be produced in specialized, certified (by authorized organizations and institutions) farms.

All three types of production and consumption of eco-foods, bio-foods and organic foods are important moments in the movement of mankind towards the future eco-civilization of mankind. As Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker and Anders Weikman note, creating an ecocivilization involves combining a “holistic and symbiotic approach rather than narrowly defined standards” [1]. One of the examples of a symbiotic approach that the authors give in their Club of Rome 50th anniversary publication is with the Xiang Yin Wei Ye Chinese Farming Corporation located in Caoxiang, Shandong Province. "to minimize the use of hormones or other animal medications, the feed used (for farmed animal food - my clarification YT) comes from well-controlled, healthy soil, with local herbs added to boost the animals' immune systems. Deliveries of fresh milk (by the farmer corporation) are limited to a certain distance to ensure quality” [1]. At the same time, the same authors summarize that organic food farms in China are not profitable enough. They advise farms producing organic food to also offer "accommodation, recreation and food on the farm" as an alternative rural tourism option. Another idea of theirs to increase motivation is to attract workers and employees in these farms as partners in agribusiness with a share in the distributed profit. [1].

If we summarize the advantages of the production and consumption of organic food in the agricultural sector, they are expressed in the following several directions:

- Create greater added value in the agricultural sector;
- Make it possible to apply sustainable practices in agricultural production;

- Contribute to the preservation of sustainable and healthy ecosystems in regions with developed organic agriculture [12];
- Contribute to the reduction of soil, air and water pollution from pesticides, herbicides and insecticides;
- Reduce the danger of unstudied and possible negative effects of genetically modified foods and products and such foods produced with the addition of hormones, on the health of people and animals;
- Enable consumers, and to some extent also producers, to lead a healthy and environmentally friendly lifestyle;
- Reduce food losses and the volume of waste thrown away by people, through price rationalization of consumer spending;
- They shorten supply chains, as shown by the example above with the Chinese farming corporation Xiang Ying Wei Ye, which limits the supply of fresh milk to a certain distance to ensure quality;
- Last but not least, organic foods and organic products contribute to the preservation of biodiversity. "At least 766 scientific reports have concluded that organic farming produces more biodiversity than other farming systems. Very often, on the principle "plants help plants", a wide range of crops is used - mixed crops, honey and medicinal plants, useful species, field protection belts. Mixed bean areas are an environment for various insects and birds" [12]. The same author also highlights the contribution of organic agriculture to the preservation of "agrobiodiversity": "The inclusion of little-used species (often as rotational crops to maintain soil fertility) reduces the erosion of agrobiodiversity, creating a healthier gene pool - a basis for future adaptation" [12].
- A big advantage of the production of organic foods and bioproducts is the environmental services that this production provides to the agro-ecosystem. These specific "ecological services" of bioproduction include: "soil formation and soil stabilization, waste recycling, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, predation, pollination, and habitat" [12]. Via these specific environmental services reduce the hidden costs of agriculture to the environment in terms of the degradation of natural resources.

All these advantages, although systematized in a telegraphic form, make it possible to conclude that the production and consumption of organic food has great prospects, both nationally and globally. At the same time, taking into account the actual consumption of organic foods at the current stage, it is logical to note that this process of imposing and scaling this type of consumption will be relatively slow and difficult. The basis for such a forecast is given by the fact that the food problem continues to be one of the main problems facing humanity and still in food production both in the agricultural sector and in industry, the quantity is given precedence over the quality of the food produced.

The reduction of food loss and the volume of food waste as a result of the production and sale of organic foods

Organic foods are an important part of the healthy lifestyle and nutrition of modern people. They minimize various allergic reactions, contribute to a more natural way of life for people. Their environmental friendliness often helps to reduce the carbon footprint and achieve zero carbon emissions.

If we look at global food loss and waste in general (not just organic food), a 2011 FAO estimate found that every year a third of all food produced in the world for human consumption never reaches the consumer's table. This means not only a missed opportunity for the economy and food security, but also a waste of all the natural resources used to grow, process, pack, transport and market food.

Food waste occurs at all stages of food supply chains for a variety of reasons that depend greatly on local conditions within each country. On a global level, a pattern is clearly visible; in high-income regions, the volume of food waste is higher in the processing, distribution and consumption stages, while in low-income countries, food losses occur in the production and post-harvest phases. In low-income countries, lack of infrastructure and lack of knowledge about proper food storage and handling, combined with unfavorable climatic conditions, favor food spoilage. In higher income countries, aesthetic preferences and arbitrary sell-by dates are the leading factors contributing to much of the food waste. [5].

Within the EU, about 10% of the food that is offered to consumers is thrown away. At the same time, more than 37 million people in the EU cannot regularly afford quality and wholesome nutrition [19].

One of the most recent statistical estimates of absolute food losses indicates 58 million tons of food waste in the EU in 2021 [19].

The production of Bulgarian organic food and organic products from the agricultural sector could be our trademark both in the country and abroad. This type of production can contribute to increasing the income of Bulgarian citizens, as well as be a prerequisite for even larger-scale development of culinary and agricultural tourism.

The Farm to Fork strategy for the EU food sector provides for clearer definition of the expiry dates of products and an end to their misinterpretation. With this

strategy, the Commission is also committed to researching the amount of food that is wasted throughout the food chain [19].

The "Farm to Fork" strategy plans to reduce waste by 10% in the production and processing of food products and by 30% in retail, restaurants, food services and households.

In March 2024, the European Parliament adjusted its position on the revision of the rules. MEPs want to reduce waste in the production and processing of food products by at least 20%, and in retail trade, restaurants, food services and households - by at least 40% by 2030. Parliament also proposes that the European Commission assess whether for 2035 higher targets should be introduced (30% and 50% respectively) [19].

The European Union wants to reduce the impact that waste leaves on the environment. Ambitious targets for recycling and reducing the use of landfills have been adopted, and new requirements on packaging waste are being prepared.

The aim is to encourage the transition to a more sustainable model of consumption and utilization of resources, known as the circular economy [6]. In October 2022, the European Parliament approved changes to the persistent organic pollutants rules to reduce the amount of hazardous chemicals in waste and production processes. The new rules introduce stricter limits, ban certain substances and aim to prevent harmful substances from entering through recycling [6]. The amendments to the rules adopted by the European Parliament are also related to the regulatory requirements for the production of organic food in the agricultural sector in the EU member states.

At the global level, different scenarios have also been developed to reduce food waste. Measures in this direction are subordinated to the idea of reducing humanity's carbon footprint and mitigating climate change

One of the UN's goals regarding sustainable development - UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12) is formulated as "Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns" and includes a specific goal to reduce food waste: "by 2030 to halve per capita food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses" [5], [7].

Within the framework of SDG 12, a 50% reduction in food waste is planned by 2030. The proposed scenario assumes a reduction in the carbon footprint of food waste by 38%, or 1.4 GtCO2 per year. This would be equivalent to the greenhouse gas emissions of the Japanese economy. Despite data and models uncertainties, the magnitude of the figures above suggests that reducing food loss and waste at global, regional and national levels would have a significant positive effect on public resources and climate change in particular [5].

Prospects for the production of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria

To begin with, I will refer to a study by Nadka Kostadinova, Georgi Alexiev, Konstantin Stankov from the University of Thrace in Stara Zagora, who in their collective publication in 2016, which state that "in recent years, organic agriculture in Bulgaria is one of the sectors, which in the conditions of crisis is developing at a rapid pace, with the areas and the number of producers included in a control system constantly increasing" [11]. I immediately hasten to make the stipulation that there is a difference between organic farming and the production of organic food in the agrarian sector. On the face of it, this distinction seems like a play on words, but in fact organic farming is a broader concept. It includes not only the production of organic foods, but also the production of bio-raw materials and bio-feeds in the agricultural sector. The latter are still poorly represented both in Europe and in the Republic of Bulgaria. The predominant production from organic farming is organic food.

In the Republic of Bulgaria, organic production, including the production of organic food in the agricultural sector, is still poorly represented - as a percentage of the total agricultural area. The areas for organic production in our country have the lowest share among all other EU countries. Most of the ecological production in the form of organic foods and bioproducts (honey, wax, herbs, mushrooms, etc.) is exported abroad, with about 6-7% finding a market in our country as well [20].

In the Republic of Bulgaria, organic production is still taking its first steps. At the same time, according to general expert assessments, this is an extremely suitable sector for Bulgaria - both because of its real natural features and not so unpolluted land, and because of its image as a traditional producer of quality agricultural products. At the moment, especially organic beekeeping and the production of bee products, which is a traditional agricultural activity in Bulgaria, show high and competitive results.

In an interview with the farmer Ivaylo Todorov, it is noted that the areas sown with organic food in Bulgaria have decreased by 20% in the last two years. It is about the period 2021-2022. "According to the statistics I saw, notes Mr. Todorov, it is clear that the farmers who offer organic production and the areas with such production are decreasing every year. Despite all the efforts and subsidies, our main challenge is heavy bureaucracy. The control is extremely large, the agricultural producers give up and it is seen that in 2 years the areas with organic production have decreased by nearly 20%." This is noted by Ivaylo Todorov, an entrepreneur in agriculture in the program "Made in Green" with presenter Roselina Petkova. The interview was published on August 14, 2023 [14].

A) Prospects for the production of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria in the short term

The prospects for the development of organic food production in the Republic of Bulgaria in the short term are determined by two strategic documents - the European Plan for Recovery and Development and the National Development Program Bulgaria 2030. They outline 4 pillars of the implementation of the plan and program in the coming years:

1. Itovative Bulgaria;
2. Green Bulgaria;
3. United Bulgaria;
4. Just Bulgaria [2].

The production and consumption of organic food corresponds to the second pillar in the National Development Plan until 2030. Within the implementation of the "Green Bulgaria" program, various measures are foreseen, some of which are aimed at improving the environment. Measures 6.4 and 6.5 of the plan are related to the production and trade of organic foods: "Measure 6.4 Improving the capacity of SMEs in connection with the transition to a circular and low-carbon economy; and Measure 6.5 Promotion of green products with the EU Ecolabel, the System for Verification of Ecological Technologies and Circular Design." [8].

One of the promising areas of organic food production in the Republic of Bulgaria is the production of organic vegetables in the agricultural sector. This type of organic production has a large set of positives, due to its following features:

- Quality, healthy food with high biological value is produced;
- Production is based entirely on the use of organic substances and excludes the introduction of chemical substances in the form of fertilizers and plant protection preparations;
- Protects the environment from pollution and maintains the ecological balance;
- Preserves, maintains and enriches natural soil fertility;
- Protects water basins and groundwater from contamination with chemical substances;
- Reduces the cost of chemical pesticides and fertilizers by using only on-farm biological agents.

The experts from the Audit Chamber in the Republic of Bulgaria state that "the process of issuing permits for control activities is also not sufficiently effective. Issuance of permits for control activities during most of the audited period was carried out without established internal rules and procedures" [22].

The Court of Audit also registered "cases of issuing permits for control activities without the applicants' procedures meeting important regulatory requirements", and the finding in other cases is that "there is no confidence that they fulfill the requirements of Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007 due to lack of documents" [22]. The database of the persons performing control for compliance with the rules for organic production of agricultural products and food does not provide the necessary traceability for the activities of the controlling persons. This can be used in bad faith by the operators (producers, traders and processors) on the one hand, and on the other hand, it creates a risk of errors in the implementation of control in the commercial network by the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency (BFSA) [22].

b) Prospects for the production of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria in the long term

Biological production has been proven to be applied successfully in the Republic of Bulgaria. In recent years, it has been one of the sub-sectors in the agro-sector that has seen growth in terms of areas, animals and the number of operators included in a monitoring control system according to EU regulations.

Control and certification in organic production is carried out by a control body for certification of biological products at the Agency for Biological Certification EOOD, accredited by the Executive Agency "Bulgarian Accreditation Service" according to BDS EN ISO/IEC 17065:2012. The body certifies Live or unprocessed agricultural products; Processed agricultural products intended for food; Fodder; Planting and sowing material; Yeast used for food or feed. The agency does not certify aquaculture, aquaculture products and wine, which also refers to agricultural production in a broad context.

Farmers certified by the Agency for Biological Certification EOOD receive Certificates recognized in over 35 countries.

The Agency for Biological Certification EOOD (ABS EOOD) itself holds Permit No. BG-BIO-17 of July 18, 2019, issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food for the control and certification of products in accordance with the requirements of Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007, Regulation (EC) No. 889/2008. From January 1, 2022, ABS EOOD carries out certification and control according to the provisions of Regulation (EU) 2018/848 and the legislation applicable to it [9].

One of the great advantages of organic food production is that this type of production and consumption contributes to the implantation of sustainability in modern agricultural production and thus supports the sustainable development of the national and world economy.

Sustainability in agro-production implies, first of all, the recovery of production experience, production knowledge and skills, and also the seed and breeding base of local productive varieties and breeds. This can only be achieved in the long term. As noted in a publication by BG Farmer, "At the genetic level, traditional and adapted seeds and breeds are preferred due to their greater resistance to diseases and climatic stress" [12].

First of all, this implies the education of personnel for the agricultural sector and, in particular, personnel to work in farms, agrarian enterprises, which are oriented towards the application of sustainable agricultural practices and aim at productions that are ecologically clean and meet the standards and requirements for organic and organic food.

Secondly, in perspective, the scientific service of the agricultural sector should be strengthened, aimed at searching for seed base, varieties, plants and breeding animals from breeds that have declined or are on the verge of extinction, in order to select those of them that can be the basis for future ecologically clean agricultural productions.

Thirdly, the state should simplify the procedure for regulating the production of ecologically clean organic food and organic food. This implies digitizing the entire control and monitoring procedure of this type of production, as well as creating a package of incentives for future ecological production. In parallel with this, the non-governmental organizations that protect the interests of consumers of agrarian products and food produced in the agricultural sector should also carry out monitoring and civil control over the producers of eco-food in the broadest sense of the word as an additional guarantor of the quality and purity of the offered eco-products. In terms of competition, the producers themselves could also mutually control each other and monitor their competitors in the industry to comply with the regulatory requirements and prevent unfair competitive practices that would compromise biologically clean productions in the agricultural sector. Of course, mutual control must be based on compliance with the legal order and transparency in the actions of competitors in this type of proceeding.

The production and consumption of organic food and organic products directly corresponds to the achievement of Goal 12 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - "Responsible Consumption and Production". [7]

Already in 2021, an electronic register of organic producers in the Republic of Bulgaria was created and updated. "The idea and purpose of the register is to reflect the requirements of the EU regulations by creating the most complete database possible for the activities of all operators who carry out organic production. Through it, the mandatory notifications that the controlling persons must make to the competent authority (the minister), the competent unit (Directorate "Biological Production") and the Food Safety Agency (FFSA)" [15] are carried out.

According to information from BABH, all registered farmers in the Republic of Bulgaria are about 103,000. Of all of them, about 6,000 certified operators deal with organic production. To them we can add the beneficiaries under measure 11 of the Program for the Development of Rural Areas, who are about 3,000 people.

In this case, in order to stimulate the development of organic agriculture and the production of organic food, Bulgaria is developing a separate measure: 11 "Organic Agriculture" within the framework of the Program for the Development of Rural Areas 2014 - 2020. Within this measure, two sub-measures are implemented:

Sub-measure 11.1 Payments for conversion to organic farming per hectare of FFA;

Sub-measure 11.2 Payments for maintenance of organic farming per hectare of EPA.

The measure definitely has a positive effect and contribution to the sustainable development of rural areas, contributing to the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change and supporting small and medium-sized farms, most of which are family farms, because as shown by national statistics, the areas covered from organic farming have been growing in recent years.

There are three types of incentives on which organic agriculture can rely, and which can be applied in the conditions of the Republic of Bulgaria in the future [12]:

"1. Consumer or market organic farming – products are clearly identified through certification and labelling. Consumers make an informed decision about how their food is produced, processed and marketed.

2. Organic agriculture organized by services – in countries such as those of the European Union, subsidies are offered for organic agriculture to generate environmental goods and services, such as reducing groundwater pollution or creating a more biologically diverse landscape.

3. Organic agriculture driven by farmers - some farmers believe that conventional agriculture is unsustainable and have developed alternative ways of production to improve the health of their family, the agricultural economy and/or their independence" [12].

In March 2021, the European Commission launched an action plan in the field of organic production within the European Union. "The plan envisages achieving the European Green Deal target of 25% of agricultural land being used for organic farming by 2030" [23].

The plan covers 23 measures and spheres of action, grouped in three directions:

- strand 1: stimulating demand and ensuring consumer confidence
- strand 2: stimulating the transition and strengthening the entire value chain
- strand 3: organic production as a role model — improving the contribution of organic agriculture to environmental sustainability" [23].

The last third direction has the greatest importance in the context of the prospects for the development of organic production and, in particular, the production of organic food and beverages in the Republic of Bulgaria.

CONCLUSIONS

Currently, in the Republic of Bulgaria, it is expected to maintain the trends of increasing the number of organic operators and the size of the areas in the control system of ABS EOOD, as well as an increase in the species diversity of organically grown crops and farm animals. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food continues to work towards ensuring the implementation of state policy in the field of supervision and control of organic production and compliance with the requirements of European and national legislation in the field.

By offering relatively healthier food products and by protecting the environment as much as possible, organic food production in the agriculture-sector works for the interests of consumers and to support their health, and from there works for the benefit of the whole society.

The production of organic food and its future depend on the ability of consumers to inform themselves and appreciate the value of healthy organic food, as well as to obtain better logistical access to this type of food, by shortening supply chains and by innovative practices to improve the moment solvency of end users.

The production and consumption of organic food in a longer perspective can only be guaranteed by its (production's) harmony with nature. Therefore, organic farming should not be seen only as an ecological alternative, it has the difficult task of ensuring to a large extent the solution of the food problem of humanity.

Specifically, with regard to the prospects and potential of the Republic of Bulgaria in the production and consumption of organic food, it is good to make the following distinction:

With regard to the production of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria, it can be summarized that it has great potential, but nevertheless, the good prospects for this specific production should not be taken as a "given". Undoubtedly, this type of agrarian production has a future, and specifically in Bulgaria it has traditions, it has potential, there are quite a few naturally clean and protected areas from excessive industrialization, which can be a base for the development of organic agriculture and ecological animal husbandry. But at the same time, there are also problems related to a lack of coordination between institutions (for example, between the Ministry of Environment and Water and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food on the occasion of the restriction of pasture livestock in the Central Balkan region), problems with control and monitoring of operators and organic food producers, problems of a financial and logistical nature. All these problems for now put Bulgaria in the position of a potential, but not promising producer of organic food. For this reason, regardless of the problems, the adopted course of growth of organic production and specifically the production of organic food can be defined as correct and promising.

This is dictated by the growing importance of organic agriculture not only in the European Union, but also on a global scale. It is a fact that the demand for organic products is increasing every year. Europe is still the second largest producer of organic food and organic products in the world. Most of the Bulgarian organic foods and products are intended for foreign markets (over 80% according to [11]). The sub-sector of the production of organic food and organic products in the country is developing upward and undoubtedly has a future.

The potential for organic food production and consumption in the Republic of Bulgaria can only be realized through the joint efforts of society, the state, farmers involved in organic production and their associations, as well as non-governmental organizations supporting the development of this type of production and consumption. Joint integrated efforts are needed to achieve the SDGs. Organic food producers prioritize various good practices in their actions to maintain environmental sustainability, based on the understanding of the indivisible nature of the SDGs [3] and seeking opportunities to achieve synergies between sectoral policies supporting and promoting organic production and consumption.

With regard to the consumption of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria, the situation in perspective is different. In contrast to the production potential, the consumption potential of the Bulgarian consumer is relatively limited. This limitation is determined by many factors and circumstances, the most important of which are:

- The relatively low level of income (the lowest in the EU according to Eurostat data);
- The relatively high prices of organic foods on the Bulgarian market;
- The relatively small market – about 6.5 million population according to the latest population censuses, which is constantly decreasing with each passing year by about 50-60,000 people;
- The lack of a culture of healthy food consumption among a large part of Bulgarian citizens;
- The lack of sufficient advertising of the benefits and importance of organic foods in the Bulgarian media;
- Insufficiently good health education in the Bulgarian education system.

In conclusion, we can distinguish the potential and prospects for the production and consumption of organic food in the Republic of Bulgaria. With regard to the production of organic food in the country, there is potential, but weak possibilities for the realization of this potential. Regarding the consumption of organic food in Bulgaria, the potential is limited, but the outlook is optimistic and will be largely determined by the increase in the income of Bulgarian citizens in the process of the country's integration into the Eurozone and the Schengen area.

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