

## POTENTIALS AND EFFECTS OF FUTURE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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### **Abstract**

*Today, more than ever, tourism activities in the natural environment have become a need and wish of tourists. The Republic of Serbia has rural areas with well-preserved nature which consists of many attractive and representative elements. However, Serbia does not have a long tradition of rural tourism. The aim of this paper is to underline the potentials, limiting factors and future development effects and opportunities of rural tourism in Serbia. The methods used in processing the data collected from primary sources are correlation analysis and descriptive statistics. The general conclusion of the research is that this form of tourism, with the adequate valorization of available potentials and management of present constraints, can become a very important factor of tourism and economic development of the country.*

**Key Words:** *potentials, limitations, rural tourism offer, Serbia*

**JEL classification:** *Z30, Z32*

### **Introduction**

Serbian rural areas have a great potential for rural tourism development which is reflected in the preserved nature, attractive landscape motifs, tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Also, if the rural areas of Serbia are compared, they are very different in economic, social and demographic terms. In this sense, it should be emphasized their geomorphological differences, differences in population, economic structures, infrastructure,

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environmental conditions (Djordjević Milošević & Milovanović, 2012). The diversity of these characteristics enriches the potential rural tourist offer of the country. These areas, on the other hand, are burdened with numerous development problems. Activation and valorisation of tourist resources in them can be a desirable way to overcome the problem of underdevelopment.

The aim of this paper is to assess potentials, limiting factors and future tourism development effects in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia. Considering the aim of the research defined in this way, primary data are collected, which enabled the assessment of all three mentioned aspects. In order to draw more accurate conclusions about potentials, limiting factors and future tourism development effects and opportunities in these areas, the compliance of respondents' answers is tested. The intention is not only to systematize the available resources and potential, not so desirable, circumstances for the development of rural tourism in the country, but also to see the level of awareness of respondents about what future development of rural tourism can bring to local communities and society as a whole.

### **Literature Review**

Rural tourism is a form of “tourism that offers the visitor a rural environment by enabling him to experience in a unique way the nature, culture and people” (Vlahović & Užar, 2019, p. 477). In this way, rural tourism enables the enjoyment of the tangible and intangible heritage of a rural destination. Rural tourism as a specific form of tourism is an opportunity for the development of non-established tourist destinations, especially in situations where other development opportunities are limited. Natural resources are significant in the creation of various tourism products, but care must be taken to use them sustainably in order to avoid their degradation, especially in rural areas (Garabinović et al., 2020). Therefore, rural tourism aims at maintaining all natural resources, landscapes, areas, cultural heritage, on the one hand, and providing tourists with an active holiday in nature and rural surroundings, on the other (Urošević & Cvijanović, 2017). The fact is that tourism development may in some cases be a large investment or may involve large enterprises, but “rural tourism can develop with relatively little investment, training and capital” (Wilson et al., 2001, p. 132).

Although rural tourism has a long tradition in Europe (Gyr, 2010), it has recently become increasingly associated with the concept of sustainable

tourism (UNEP, 2005) in a particular area, especially in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. By maintaining traditional culture, preserving the environment, creating job opportunities, and thus increasing income, sustainable rural tourism can completely revitalize rural areas (Fons et al., 2011; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011; Kallmuenzer et al., 2018). Consumption of local food and their gastronomy in general also contribute significantly to the supply of rural regions (Renko et al., 2010; Sidali et al., 2015). Thanks to all that, rural tourism very quickly became an integral element of rural economies and their basic driver (Petrović et al., 2017). Today, the chance for its development is greater than ever, as more and more people are looking for such spaces as an escape from the city's hectic everyday life (Schmidt et al., 2016; Vaishar & Štastná, 2020).

Tourism and agriculture are often the only options for the development of rural areas. In this context, it is important to talk about the benefits of their integral development have been recognized worldwide (Ristić et al., 2019). In addition to the connection of rural tourism with agriculture and some other sectors of the economy, rural tourism is highly correlated with other types of tourism products, which can also be realised in rural areas. Such types of tourism are nature-based tourism or cultural tourism. The local and traditional foods, which are highly valued in the tourist experience, are a link that connects rural and gastronomic tourism (Petrović et al., 2015; Stanišić et al., 2018). Ecotourism is also form of tourism which is striving for a preserved, unpolluted environment, often in rural areas (Sandilyan et al., 2008). Second-home tourism is also one of the forms of tourism that mainly develops in rural areas and which appeared as a result of their promotion (Mirani & Farahani, 2015).

Various developmental aspects of rural tourism are the subject of interest of numerous authors in the national context. While on the one hand, many authors are specifically studying the development possibilities and problems of this form of tourism (Cvijanović & Mihailović, 2016; Erdeji et al., 2013; Vuković, 2017), others emphasize its important role in the regional development of the Republic of Serbia (Dimitrovski et al. al., 2012; Igić et al., 2020; Todorović & Bjeljic, 2009). While in the theoretical framework a significant contribution to the understanding of the issue is made, the situation in practice is not so desirable. With the exception of a few positive examples, rural tourism is still underdeveloped and insufficiently recognized as a tourist product of the Republic of Serbia. Rural areas are burdened with numerous problems, with insufficient and inadequate capacities and poor infrastructure are only a part of them.

However, “having in mind the ecological quality, and above all the preservation of natural resources in Serbia, it is possible to provide better market position, strong competitiveness, long-term development sustainability, higher profitability and ultimately better positioning of these areas” (Kostić et al., 2018, p. 855).

### **A methodological framework of research and sample description**

The primary data collected through the survey questionnaire method are analysed in the paper. The questionnaires were distributed online. The sample included 176 respondents who, in addition to the questions on the basic demographic characteristics of the respondents, answered a total of 19 questions expressing their views on the rural tourism development in the Republic of Serbia. In terms of demographic characteristics, the survey included: (1) 77.3% of female respondents and 22.7% of male respondents; (2) 23.3% of respondents aged 20 to 30 years, 48.9% of respondents aged 31 to 40 years, 19.3% of respondents aged 41 to 50 years, 5.7% of respondents aged 51 to 60 years and 2.7% of respondents aged 60 and over years; (3) 27.9% of respondents with secondary education, 8.5% of respondents with higher education, 37.5% of respondents with university education, 17.6% of respondents with master's level of education and 8.5% of respondents with the level of PhD education; (4) 76.7% of employed respondents, 15.9% of unemployed; 5.1% of students and 2.3% of pensioners.

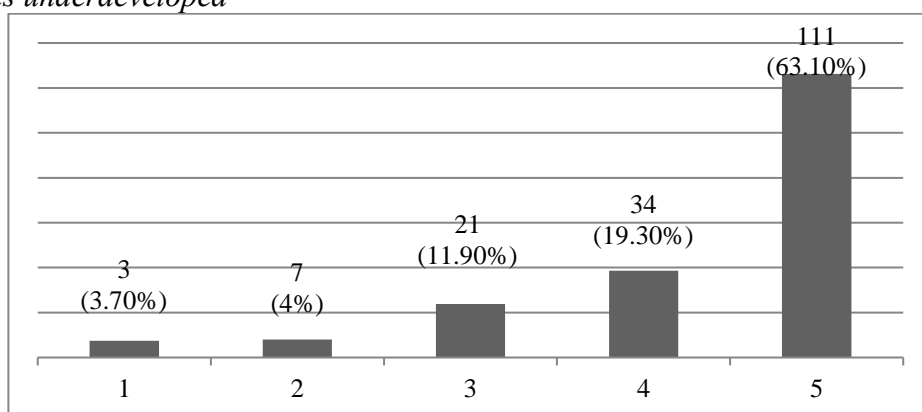
In the analysis of primary data on respondents' views on rural tourism in Serbia, the method of descriptive statistics and the method of correlation analysis are used. The results of descriptive statistics have enabled the systematization of valid recommendations for improving the rural tourism offer, respecting potentials and limiting factors of rural tourism development. Compliance of the respondents in the rating of potentials, limiting factors and effects of the rural tourism development is tested by the correlation analysis. The paper starts from the initial assumption that there is a clear view of respondents on key resources, shortcomings and future development effects of rural tourism.

### **Research results and discussion**

Before considering the respondents' views on the potentials, limitations and effects of the rural tourism development in Serbia, respondents expressed their opinion on the current level of this form of tourism in Serbia.

Respondents rated statement “Rural tourism in Serbia is underdeveloped” on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 - disagree at all; 2 - disagree; 3 - neither agree nor disagree; 4 - agree and 5 - completely agree). The response structure is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Structure of the ratings of the statement “Rural tourism in Serbia is underdeveloped”*



Source: *Authors*

The highest percentage of respondents (63.1%) completely agrees with the mentioned statement. Adding to this the percentage of respondents who rated this statement with a grade of 4 (19.3%), it can be concluded that the respondents' predominant view is that rural tourism in Serbia is underdeveloped. Only 7.7% of the respondents (grades 1 and 2) disagree with this statement. Starting from the results shown in Figure 1, the respondents further supplemented their general view on the rural tourism development in Serbia by assessing the potentials, limiting factors and possible effects of its more successful development.

In order to highlight the potential of development of rural tourism in Serbia, the respondents rated four offered statements with the indicated scale from 1 to 5. The response structure and the mean score of each statement are shown in Table 1. The highest percentage of respondents strongly agrees (73.9%) or agree (17.6%) with the statement „The Republic of Serbia has huge potential for further development of rural tourism“. Also, a significant percentage of respondents strongly agree (71%) or agree (18.8%) with the view that rural areas of Serbia are very rich in natural and cultural resources, as necessary prerequisites for tourism development.

Table 1: *Rating of potentials of rural tourism development in the Republic of Serbia*

	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Mean</i>
P1. The Republic of Serbia has huge potential for further development of rural tourism	4 (2.3%)	2 (1.1%)	9 (5.1%)	31 (17.6%)	130 (73.9%)	<b>4.59</b>
P2. Rural areas of the Republic of Serbia are rich in natural and cultural resources, which are a necessary precondition for tourism development	2 (1.1%)	3 (1.7%)	13 (7.4%)	33 (18.8%)	125 (71%)	<b>4.56</b>
P3. Low population density of rural areas of Serbia is a major advantage of tourism development in them	27 (15.3%)	30 (17%)	74 (42%)	27 (15.3%)	18 (10.2%)	<b>2.88</b>
P4. Natural beauties with preserved ecosystems and biodiversity are a major advantage of tourism development in rural areas in Serbia	3 (1.7%)	1 (0.6%)	14 (8%)	34 (19.3%)	124 (70.5%)	<b>4.56</b>

Source: *Authors*

Natural beauty, preserved ecosystems and biodiversity are seen as an advantage of tourism development in rural areas of Serbia by the 89.8% of the total number of respondents (70.5% of respondents agree completely and 19.3% of respondents agree). These three statements (P1, P2, and P4) record approximately equal, high mean scores. In contrast, P3 statement has a mean score of 2.88, and a significantly smaller percentage of respondents strongly agree (10.2%) or agree (15.3%) with the statement that the low population density of rural areas is an advantage of tourism development.

The interdependence of the rating of the rural tourism development potentials in Serbia is shown in Table 2. The interdependence is tested by the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient ( $r_s$ ). "This indicator belongs to a group of non-parametric indicators, whose application does not require the fulfilment of certain assumptions (first of all, the normality distribution) which requires the calculation of parametric indicators" (Janković-Milić, 2016, p. 79). There is a high degree of compliance of the respondents in the evaluation of the statements P1, P2 and P4, while there is a negative correlation between the rating of statement P3 and the ratings of statements P1, P2 and P4.

Table 2: *Correlation of the potential rating*

		P1	P2	P3	P4
P1	$r_s$	1.000	0.900(*)	-0.616	1.000(**)
	Sig.	.	0.037	0.269	.
P2	$r_s$	0.900(*)	1.000	-0.462	0.900(*)
	Sig.	0.037	.	0.434	0.037
P3	$r_s$	-0.616	-0.462	1.000	-0.616
	Sig.	0.269	0.434	.	0.269
P4	$r_s$	1.000(**)	0.900(*)	-0.616	1.000
	Sig.	.	0.037	0.269	.

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).  
\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: *Authors*

In terms of limiting factors for the rural tourism development in the Republic of Serbia, the respondents also rated four statements on a scale of 1 to 5. The response structure and the mean values of the statement ratings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Ratings of limiting factors of rural tourism development in Serbia*

	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Mean</i>
L1. Rural tourism in Serbia is insufficiently promoted	2 (1.1%)	5 (2.8%)	24 (13.6%)	38 (21.6%)	107 (60.8%)	<b>4.38</b>
L2. Available receptive/accommodation capacities are a limiting factor in the development of rural tourism in Serbia	8 (4.6%)	12 (6.9%)	57 (32.6%)	57 (32.6%)	41 (23.4%)	<b>3.61</b>
L3. Transport/communal infrastructure is a limiting factor in the development of rural tourism in Serbia	5 (2.9%)	7 (4%)	40 (22.9%)	37 (21.1%)	86 (49.1%)	<b>4.07</b>
L4. The lack of interest/awareness of the local population is a limiting factor in the development of rural tourism in Serbia	1 (0.6%)	6 (3.4%)	32 (18.3%)	56 (32%)	80 (45.7%)	<b>4.16</b>

Source: *Authors*

The highest percentage of respondents (60.8%) fully agrees with the statement that insufficient promotional activities are a limiting factor for more intensive rural tourism development. The percentage of respondents (21.6%) who agrees with this view is also significant. Available receptive/accommodation capacities as a limiting factor for the development of rural tourism in Serbia are seen by a total of 56% of respondents (23.4% fully agree and 32.6% agree). Inadequate transport/communal infrastructure is a limiting factor for more successful development of rural tourism, according to a total of 70.2% of respondents, while insufficient interest/awareness of the local population is a limiting factor for rural tourism development, according to 77.7% of respondents. The highest average grade was recorded by L1 (4.38%) and the lowest by L2 (3.61%).

The consistency of the ratings of the statements was tested by calculating Spriman's correlation coefficient (Table 4). There is a high positive statistically significant correlation between the ratings of statements L1, L3 and L4. The relationship between the L2 statement ratings and the L1, L3, and L4 statement ratings is positive, but not statistically significant.

Table 4: *Correlation of the ratings of limiting factors*

		L1	L2	L3	L4
L1	$r_s$	1.000	0.667	0.900(*)	1.000(**)
	Sig.	.	0.219	0.037	.
L2	$r_s$	0.667	1.000	0.667	0.667
	Sig.	0.219	.	0.219	0.219
L3	$r_s$	0.900(*)	0.667	1.000	0.900(*)
	Sig.	0.037	0.219	.	0.037
L4	$r_s$	1.000(**)	0.667	0.900(*)	1.000
	Sig.	.	0.219	0.037	.
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					

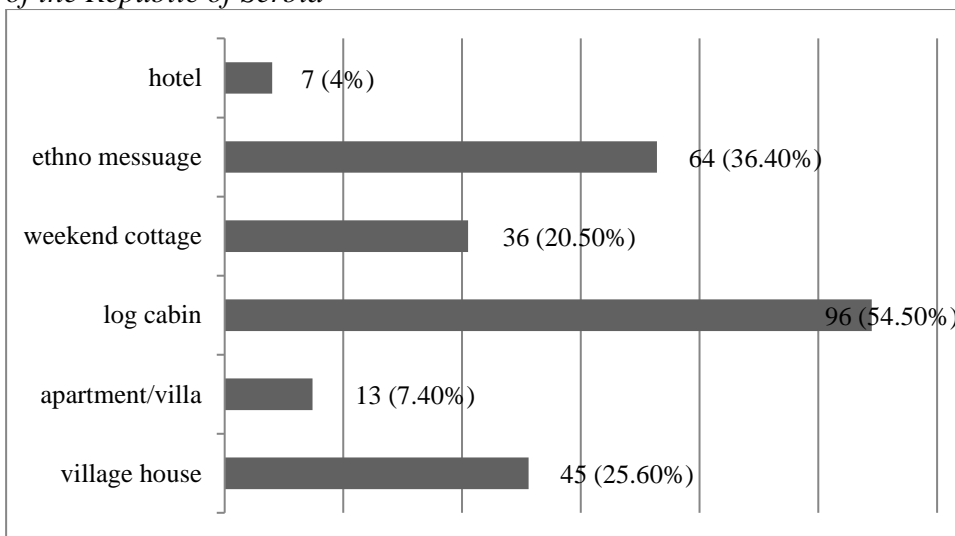
Source: *Authors*

When it comes to accommodation, the smallest percentage of respondents sees the available receptive/accommodation capacity as one of the factors that limit rural tourism development in Serbia, which can be assessed as a positive fact. Respondents had the opportunity to point out the most desirable type of accommodation in rural areas. The structure of their



responses (Figure 2) can be a guideline for further improvement of accommodation in Serbia's rural areas.

Figure 2: *Most preferred types of accommodation capacity in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia*

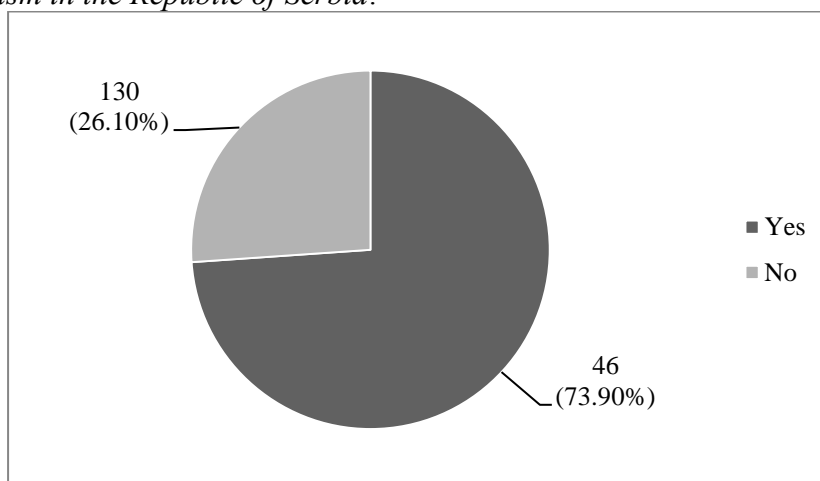


*Source: Authors*

Most respondents, 96 or 54.4%, would prefer to choose log cabins for vacation in Serbian rural areas. Ethno messages are second most attractive, followed by village house and weekend cottage. A relatively small number of respondents, 13 or 7.4%, would choose to stay in apartments or villas, as well as in hotels (7 respondents, or 4%) when vacationing in rural areas. Such a structure of the respondents' answers indicates the positive fact that the contact with nature and tradition are more valued in relation to the comfort that can potentially be provided by hotel type accommodation facilities.

The results of the answer to the question “In your opinion, is there a clear strategy for the further development and improvement of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia?” (Figure 3) point to another potential factor which can limit more successful and intensive rural tourism development in the Republic of Serbia. Specifically, 73.9% of respondents believe that there is no clear strategy, while 26.1% of respondents answered positively to the above question.

Figure 3: *Structure of the answer to the question “In your opinion, is there a clear strategy for the further development and improvement of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia?”*



Source: *Authors*

Respondents also had the opportunity to rate the potential effects of the future development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia, evaluating four given statements. The assessment focuses on the contribution of rural tourism development to the overall development and revitalization of rural areas in Serbia, the contribution to employment and income of local people, the possibility of linking rural tourism with agriculture and creating markets for agricultural and other local products, the contribution of this form of tourism to local development and the national economy. The response structure and the mean score of each statement are shown in Table 5.

As many as 92.6% of respondents agree with the statement that tourism development in rural areas can contribute to faster development and revitalization of these areas (73.3% strongly agree and 19.3% agree). A significant part of respondents (89.9%, of which 73.9% strongly agree and 15.9% agree) agrees with the statement that tourism development enables rural households to employ local people with minimal investment with positive consequences on their revenues. Out of the total number of respondents, 76.7% strongly agree and 17% agree that the activation of tourist activity in rural areas allows rural households to earn income from the sale of products from domestic production (agricultural products, domestic products, etc.).

Table 5: *Rating of potential effects of future rural tourism development*

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
E1. The development of tourism in rural areas can contribute to faster development and revitalization of these areas	2 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	11 (6.3%)	34 (19.3%)	129 (73.3%)	<b>4.63</b>
E2. Tourism development provides rural households the ability to employ local people with minimal investment with positive consequences on their income	1 (0.6%)	3 (1.7%)	14 (8%)	28 (15.9%)	130 (73.9%)	<b>4.60</b>
E3. The development of tourism in rural areas enables rural households to earn income from the sale of products from domestic production (agricultural products, domestic handicrafts, etc.).	2 (1.1%)	1 (0.6%)	8 (4.5%)	30 (17%)	135 (76.7%)	<b>4.67</b>
E4. Tourism in rural areas contributes to the strengthening of local and regional economies and the economy of the country as a whole	3 (1.7%)	1 (0.6%)	16 (9.1%)	28 (15.9%)	128 (72.7%)	<b>4.75</b>

Source: *Authors*

A significant percentage of respondents, 88.6% (of which 72.7% strongly agree and 15.9% agree), agrees that tourism in rural areas contributes to the strengthening of local and regional economies and the economy of the country as a whole. This statement also recorded a highest average score of 4.75.

 Table 6: *Correlation of the ratings of potential effects*

		E1	E2	E3	E4
E1	$r_s$	1.000	0.900(*)	1.000(**)	1.000(**)
	Sig.	.	0.037	.	.
E2	$r_s$	0.900(*)	1.000	0.900(*)	0.900(*)
	Sig.	0.037	.	0.037	0.037
E3	$r_s$	1.000(**)	0.900(*)	1.000	1.000(**)
	Sig.	.	0.037	.	.
E4	$r_s$	1.000(**)	0.900(*)	1.000(**)	1.000
	Sig.	.	0.037	.	.

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).  
 \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: *Authors*

The compliance of the ratings of the statements was tested by calculating Spriman's correlation coefficient (Table 6).

A high level of compliance in the ratings of the statements about potential effects is observed. Namely, a high positive statistically significant correlation between the ratings of all statements is recorded, that is, the respondents strongly agree that the development of rural tourism in Serbia can provide numerous economic and other benefits to the local community.

### **Conclusion**

Rural tourism in Serbia, although still at a low level of development, has been recognized by both the professional and scientific public, as well as by policy and tourism development strategy makers as one of the key forms of tourism and the most important parts of the integrated tourism product of the country. The research conducted in this paper emphasized the respondents' views on the potentials, limitations and effects of tourism development in rural areas of Serbia. It can be concluded that there is a high degree of compliance of the respondents' views that the key advantages for the development of tourism in rural areas of Serbia are reflected in the rich natural and anthropogenic tourism resources located in these areas, natural beauty, preserved ecosystems and biodiversity.

However, a high percentage of respondents also agree with the view that level of development of rural tourism in the country is not adequate. The key reasons for this attitude are highly rated insufficient level of promotion, insufficient awareness and interest of the local population for development of this form of tourism, as well as insufficient or inadequate infrastructural capacities. The highest degree of respondents' compliance exists when it comes to the potential effects of future development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia. These effects are primarily reflected in the contribution to local and regional development, as well as the economic development of the country as a whole, where the economic security of local people and local households is the first step towards achieving higher economic goals.

In this way, it can be argued that the initial assumption of the research has been confirmed. Respondents recognize the potentials and limitations, but are also aware of the benefits that more successful activation of tourism in rural areas can bring. The structure of the sample of respondents, which included only potential domestic tourists, and the time period of distribution of the questionnaire can be singled out as the key limitation of

the research. Future research may be aimed at examining changes in the perception of the potential, limitations and levels of development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia under the influence of changes brought by the still current global pandemic.

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