

THE FUTURE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AS AN ADVENTURE TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a particularly severe blow to the tourism industry. The introduced movement restrictions resulted in an unprecedented drop in tourist movements, causing economic loss and unemployment in this sector. However, not all tourism segments suffered equal effects. Namely, adventure tourism, as a type of tourism that takes place in the natural environment and most often in small groups, experienced growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it is expected that in the post-pandemic period, its growth will be even higher. In that sense, the aim of this paper is to emphasize the natural potentials of the Republic of Serbia as adventure tourism destination. The results of the qualitative analysis have shown that the Republic of Serbia has abundant natural resources for, yet insufficiently developed, adventure tourism.

Key Words: *COVID-19, adventure tourism, adventure tourist, Republic of Serbia*

JEL classification: *Z30, Z32*

Introduction

Since its appearance in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed society, trends and priorities and created challenges, which are manifested in all aspects of everyday life. Gössling et al. (2021) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic caused the “most severe disruption of the global economy since World War II” (p. 1), dealing a particularly devastating

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blow to the global tourism industry and tourist movements. Tourism requires “open borders, stable political, socio-economic and, above all, health and security conditions” (Počuča & Matijašević, 2021, p. 361). At the beginning of March 2020, the whole world was faced with the restrictions and instability, which, among other things, led to the complete cessation of tourist travel. Moreover, COVID-19 pandemic had a very strong effect on tourism industry especially in those countries that, “using abundant natural potentials and resources, base their economic progress excessively on the tourism development” (Leković & Milutinović, 2021, p. 2).

World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) (2020) highlights four trends that will shape the future of tourism, sustainability being one of them, stating that “the world has been re-invigorated to tackle social, environmental, and institutional sustainability” (p. 2). The sector of tourism that minimizes the negative effect on the environment is adventure tourism, which has a growing trend as people are becoming more concerned with the preservation of the planet. During the COVID-19 pandemic, “adventure travel stood out as the leading recovering segment in terms of online search activity, as travelers turned to nature-based activities to avoid crowded places and improve mental and physical wellbeing” (WTTC, 2021, p. 8). In addition, it is possible that adventure tourism will increase its attraction in the post-pandemic period, since adventure tourism destinations are environmentally friendly and typically located in nature.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly a devastating period for global tourism, the future of adventure tourism is bright. When travel continues, it is expected that this type of nature-based tourism, which is dominated by nature adventures in small groups, will be far safer than crowded destinations. Kumar & Deshmukh' (2022) research has shown that adventure tourism is recording dynamic growth around the world and an increasing number of people are getting involved in some type of adventure activity. The number of tourists involved in adventure activities in the first decades of the 21st century is growing at average annual rate that is significantly higher than the average growth rates of global tourist traffic. International market of adventure tourism is estimated at \$112,227 million in 2020. It is projected to reach a value of \$1,169,095 million by 2028, growing at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 20.1% from 2020 to 2028 (Kumar & Deshmukh, 2022).

Bearing in mind the abovementioned, the subject of the paper is the future of adventure tourism in the Republic of Serbia. The aim of the paper is to acquaint the academic public with the concept of adventure tourism and natural potentials of the Republic of Serbia that are important for this type of tourism activity. The motive for conducting the research is the lack of literature that highlights the potential of Republic of Serbia as an adventure tourism destination, which gained great importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a tendency to grow even more in the post-pandemic period. Qualitative methodology based on the research of current and relevant literature in the field of adventure tourism was used to achieve the aim of the paper and draw valid conclusions.

Theoretical Background of Adventure Tourism

Adventure tourism is a relatively new type of tourism that has emerged in the last two decades although some aspects of it were manifested before. Broadly speaking, adventure tourism is any tourist activity related to nature, and its development basis is abundant natural resources and favorable geographical position of a destination (Gašović, 2017). It is very difficult to define adventure tourism, because its characteristics overlap with other specific forms of tourism, such as sport (Dimitrovski et al., 2021), rural (Leković et al., 2020), cultural (Sančanin et al., 2019) or ecotourism (Luković & Šilc, 2021). It is also closely related to nature-based tourism, but while nature-based tourism products focus on nature observation, adventure tourism products focus on concrete actions in nature (Dimitrovski et al., 2021a). The term adventure tourism is used for commercial guided tours, where the main attraction is outdoor recreation, most commonly in nature, so it includes specialized sporting and similar equipment, and provides tourists with excitement and adrenaline (Buckley, 2003).

Adventure tourism can be defined “as a trip that includes at least two of the following three elements: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion” (UNWTO, 2014, p. 10). This type of tourism includes a combination of adventure and excitement, which is realized in an external environment and can include a wide range of activities, from those with a high level of risk, to lower risk activities (Bentley et al., 2001). Buckley (2010) believes that “adventure tourism is a broad term that encompasses all types of outdoor recreational activities that offer significant elements of excitement” (p. 4). The global network that connects adventure travel organizers and adventure tourism destinations, Adventure Travel Trade

Association (ATTA), classifies all adventure tourism activities into hard and soft (Table 1).

Table 1: *Categorization of adventure activities*

	Type of adventure	
	Hard adventure	Soft adventure
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Caving - Climbing (on mountains/rocks/ice) - Heli-skiing - Kite surfing - Paragliding - Trekking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Archaeological expeditions - Backpacking - Birdwatching - Camping - Canoeing - Cycling - Eco-tourism - Environmentally sustainable activities - Fishing/fly-fishing - Hiking - Horseback riding - Hunting - Kayaking - Orienteering - Motorized sports - Rafting - Research expeditions - Safari - Sand boarding - Sailing - Scuba diving - Snorkeling - Skiing/Snow-boarding - Stand-up paddle boarding - Surfing - Volunteer tourism

Source: ATTA, 2013, p. 4

The main difference between hard and soft adventure is the level of risk and the necessary knowledge of skills. Thus, a hard adventure implies a higher risk level and requires more advanced skills and experience. Basic motives of hard adventure tourists are the risk and challenge they want to experience on the adventure travel (Pomfret, 2006). They are ready for all weather conditions, as well as a restrictive sleep and diet schedule (Millington et al., 2001). On the other hand, soft adventure implies a lower risk level, so the tourist’s experience is not necessary for this type of adventure activity. The main motives of soft adventure tourists are escape from everyday routine, the desire to experience a new environment, new excitement, the desire to socialize and self-discovery (Pomfret, 2006). Kumar & Deshmukh’ (2022) research has shown that market size of the soft adventure has achieved outstanding results in 2020, accounting for

\$37,595 million, expecting to reach \$380,687 million by 2028. This accounts CAGR of 20.1% from 2020 to 2028. Within soft adventure segment, land-based activities were the most dominant in 2020, with prediction to remain so throughout this period (Kumar & Deshmukh, 2022).

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2014) characterizes adventure tourism as resilient, because “adventure tourists are passionate and risk-taking” (p. 10). This report has shown that adventure tourists are interested in visiting destinations that have been affected by natural and political crises or are recovering from environmental and political stress. Also, the need to provide appropriate sporting equipment makes adventure tourism a relatively more expensive form of tourist travel. In that sense, this type of tourism “attracts high value customers that are willing to pay a premium for exciting and authentic experiences” (UNWTO, 2014, p. 10). In addition, adventure tourism supports local economy due to significant income contribution that remains to a local destination. According to the estimates of the adventure travel organizers, about 65% of the total travel expenses paid for the adventure travel package remain in the local economy (ATTA, 2014). Adventure tourism fosters sustainable development and its participants and policymakers comply to sustainable environmental practices (UNWTO, 2014). They are aware of the fact that without a preserved natural environment, the destination will lose its competitiveness, and consequently tourists.

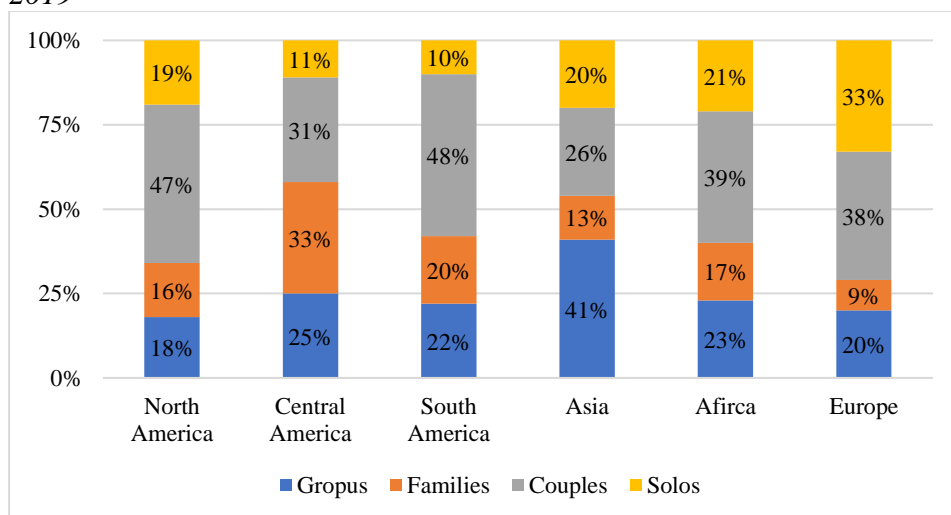
Basic Characteristics of Adventure Tourists

Based on the age and level of involvement in adventure tourism, adventure tourists can be grouped into two main segments: leisure adventurers and enthusiastic adventurers (GlobalData, 2018, p. 15). Leisure adventurers mostly participate in soft adventurous activities, usually have a higher disposable income level and free time and have experienced adventure tourism when they were younger. Adventure enthusiasts are more active tourists and the main purpose of their vacation is an adventure, where they expect a physical and mental challenge and usually take hard adventurous activities. They usually spend more money on the equipment needed to carry out the activity (Stanišić, 2019).

Adventurous tourists often use the accommodation facilities that differ from the facilities used by ordinary tourists. The most popular forms of accommodation are camps, mountain huts and mountain lodges. There are

also tourists who want to spend the night in a luxury or comfortable accommodation facility, and then be transported every day to the location where the adventure activity is organized (Swarbrooke et al., 2003). According to ATTA, the largest number of adventure tourists are between 45 and 64 years of age (80%), dominated by women (53%) who tend to travel alone (59%). Adventure tourists prefer foreign travel to domestic. They most often use the Internet, especially social networks, in order to obtain the necessary information regarding travel and destination, but they also greatly appreciate the recommendations of famous people and travel agencies (ATTA, 2020). Figure 1 shows the way adventure tourists travel (groups, families, couples, solos) by region. In North America, South America, Africa and Europe adventure tourist prefer to travel in couples. In Asia, the most popular ways for traveling are in groups. Families make up the highest percentage of all adventure travelers in Central America. In Central America and South America the smallest percentage of adventure tourists travel solo. In other regions, family trip is the least popular way of adventure traveling.

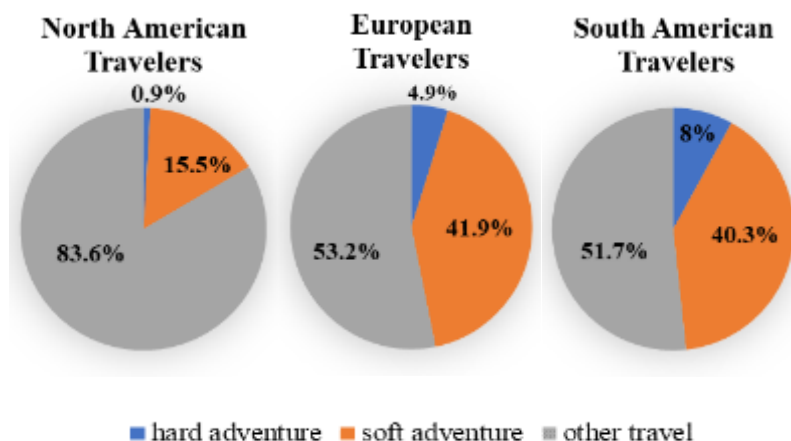
Figure 1: Preferred way of traveling for adventure tourists by region in 2019



Source: ATTA, 2020

The most important emitting markets for adventure tourists are Europe, North America and South America, participating with 69% in the total number of adventure tourists (UNWTO, 2014). Figure 2 shows participation of adventure tourists in the structure of total tourists in mentioned regions.

Figure 2: Share of adventure tourists in total number of tourists by region



Source: ATTA, 2013, p. 6

Significant share of total tourists from Europe (46.8%) and South America (48.3%) are adventure tourists. In Europe, 4.9% of the total number of tourists participates in hard and 41.9% in soft adventure activities. At the same time, 8% of tourists from South America are involved in hard and 40.3% in soft adventure trips. Although North America is a significant emitting market in adventure tourism, the data show that only 16.4% of total tourists from North America are adventure tourists, whereby 0.9% of them engage in some type of hard adventure activities, and 15.5% in soft adventure activities.

Country Rankings Based on Adventure Tourism Development Index

Adventure Tourism Development Index (ATDI) is a useful tool for monitoring the development level and competitiveness of a particular country as an adventure tourism destination. The ATDI was created in 2008 in cooperation with ATTA and George International Institute for Tourism Studies Washington. ATDI assesses the potentials and opportunities of countries to compete in the global adventure tourism market through measuring the value of ten pillars grouped into three factors relevant to the attractiveness of the destination (Table 2). Countries are ranked based on the principles of sustainable adventure tourism, separately, developed countries and developing countries.

Table 2: *Factors and pillars of the Adventure Tourism Development Index*

Safe & welcoming	Adventure	Readiness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainable development - Safety - Natural resources - Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entrepreneurship - Adventure resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Humanitarian - Infrastructure - Cultural resources - Image

Source: ATTA, 2018

The attractiveness of an adventure tourism destination largely depends on its safety, hospitality, and openness to tourism which is measured by the first factor of the ATDI. The second factor measures competitiveness of destinations for adventure tourism, by considering the adventure resources and environment for entrepreneurship development. The readiness of the destination to host adventure tourists is measured by the third factor, through its image, cultural resources, available infrastructure and human development, such as the presence of basic services and combinations of adventure and volunteer travel.

Table 3 shows the leading countries according to ATDI in 2008, 2018 and 2020. If the first year of calculating the ATDI (2008) and 2020 are compared, it can be noticed that developed countries like Spain, United States, United Kingdom and France have lost their place among the top ten. On the other hand, countries like Denmark, Canada, Finland and Australia have positioned themselves among the top ten. Countries that are consistently among the leading ten have stayed there because of their excellent results in the *adventure resources* and *entrepreneurship* pillars (ATTA, 2018, p. 15). Due to its low unemployment rate and high score in the environmental protection, Switzerland has the best score in *sustainable development* and *safety*, which is why it has always been ranked in the top three countries, along with New Zealand.

For the third year in a row, Iceland ranks first as the most competitive adventure destination in the world and ranks very high in terms of *adventure resources*, while in 2008 it took only the ninth place. Iceland increased its score mainly due to increase in the *health* and *image* scores (ATTA, 2018, p. 15).

Table 3: *Top ten countries for adventure travel (developed and developing countries) according to ATDI*

Developed countries			
Rank	2008	2018	2020
1	Switzerland	Iceland	Iceland
2	Sweden	Switzerland	Switzerland
3	New Zealand	Germany	New Zealand
4	United Kingdom	New Zealand	Germany
5	Spain	Norway	Norway
6	United States	Sweden	Finland
7	Norway	Canada	Sweden
8	Germany	Finland	Canada
9	Iceland	United Kingdom	Denmark
10	<i>France</i>	Australia	<i>Australia</i>
Developing countries			
Rank	2008	2018	2020
1	Estonia	Czech Republic	Czech Republic
2	Chile	Israel	Chile
3	Slovak Republic	Estonia	Slovak Republic
4	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic	Slovenia
5	Hungary	Poland	Israel
6	Botswana	Chile	Estonia
7	Bulgaria	Romania	Poland
8	Jordan	Bulgaria	Bulgaria
9	Latvia	Slovenia	Romania
10	Uruguay	Jordan	Costa Rica

Source: ATTA, 2020

Among developing countries, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, have consistently remained in the top five, because of their high results in *adventure resources* and *entrepreneurship* (ATTA, 2018, p. 15). Estonia was also among the leading five, but dropped to the sixth place in 2020. Jordan, Botswana, Latvia, Hungary and Uruguay dropped out of the leading ten in 2008 compared to 2020. Countries like Poland, Slovenia, Israel, Costa Rica and Romania were not initially in the top ten, but emerged in the later years strengthening their high position.

For the fourth year in a row, the Czech Republic maintains its position as the most competitive adventure market among developing countries. The Czech Republic does not dominate in any area, but achieves good results

as a whole, without noticeable weak points. Israel fell from the second to fifth position as a result of declining results in the *natural resources* pillar, caused by the increase in population density. However, it has to be mentioned that, initially, Israel was not among top ten, but increased its position mainly because of the improvement in the *image* and *adventure resources* pillars (ATTA, 2018, p. 15).

The Republic of Serbia is classified in the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia and ranks fifth within that region and 26th among developing countries in 2020. It is preceded by Croatia, which is the first in this region, and 11th in the overall ranking, followed by Georgia with the overall ranking of 18, then Montenegro (19) and Turkey (23). It is important to note that in 2008, none of these countries were among top five of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. The Republic of Serbia was ranked 14th in the mentioned region in 2008 (ATTA, 2008; 2020).

Table 4: Rank of the Republic of Serbia according to ATDI (2008-2020)

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013	2015	2018	2020
Rank	134	114	71	65	33	44	39	26

Source: ATTA, 2020

Table 4 shows the rank of the Republic of Serbia from 2008 to 2020. As it can be noticed, the Republic of Serbia is considered one of the biggest jumpers on the list, because it improved its rank from 134th to 26th. The Republic of Serbia has improved its position mainly because of *safety* and *humanitarian* pillars, which could be interpreted as the existence of basic conditions, from sewage, to hospitality and volunteering (ATTA, 2008; 2020).

Potentials of Adventure Tourism in the Republic of Serbia

Adventure tourism has been recently developed in the Republic of Serbia, but has attracted a lot of attention, from all interested parties. However, this type of tourism is still not largely developed in the Republic of Serbia, due to insufficient promotion and licensed guides, poor infrastructure reflected in unmarked trails and necessary signs, and inadequate destination management. Therefore, additional investments in adventure tourism are needed, because the Republic of Serbia has significant potentials in terms of natural resources, as well as ideal places or implementing this type of tourism. The Tourism Organization of Serbia presented a number of

adventurous activities that can be practiced throughout country, such as hiking and mountaineering, cycling, rafting, skiing, birdwatching, free climbing, kayaking and canyoning (The Tourism Organization of Serbia, 2022). In addition to the above activities, 4x4 offroad tours, paragliding, caving and *via ferrata* are also popular.

The most popular adventure tourism activities in the Republic of Serbia are rafting, kayaking and canyoning. The geomorphology of Western Serbia, characterized by many lakes, rivers, caves and canyons, is especially favorable for adventure. Mountains Zlatibor, Tara, Stara planina, Suva planina, Fruška gora and Kopaonik, as well as gorge Jelašnička klisura and the canyon of the Uvac river are the most popular destinations. Wild Serbia Travel Agency offers numerous tours for these activities, such as kayaking on the river Uvac, Drina, Danube and Ibar, Belgrade war island kayak and Novi Sad-Belgrade touring kayak (Wild Serbia, 2022). Canyoning is very popular in the canyons of the Tribuća River, the Porečka River and the Rača river, as well as Dabrov Canyon. Apart from the potential of the Drina river as a rafting destination, two manifestations of this character, which attract large number of tourists every year, are held in the Republic of Serbia – the Limska regata on the Lim river and Veseli spust on the Ibar river.

Hiking and cycling are also popular among adventure tourists, which is not surprising because the Republic of Serbia has a large number of mountains suitable for these activities. Some of the popular destinations for these activities are mountains Tara and Valjevske planine, Gradac river, Western Serbia and Danube Iron Gate (Wild Serbia, 2022). In recent years, the Danube region has been promoted as popular hiking and cycling destination. Very important cycling route for the Republic of Serbia is EuroVelo 6, a route that runs along the Danube. The Atlantic-Black Sea cycling route is one of the most popular EuroVelo routs. It is 4.450 kilometers long, passing through 11 UNESCO cities, six European rivers and ten countries (EuroVelo, 2022).

The steel path or *via ferrata* is represented by paths along the rocks with steel ladders carved into the rocks used for climbing. It is actually the first step towards mountaineering, because the feeling is similar, the climbers are on the rock, their feet are on the ladder, but they are also secured with the steel cable that usually follows the trail. The possibility for this type of climbing in the Republic of Serbia exists in only three places: Kablar mountain, which is good for beginners, on the rocks of Berim on the Mokra

Gora mountain, and in gorge Rugovska klisura near Peć, where there are two paths Ari and Mat.

The great, but still insufficiently used potential of the Republic of Serbia are caves and caving. Although about 1,500 caves have been discovered in the Republic of Serbia so far, only 10% of them have been explored. Their natural characteristics indicate that, apart from speleologists, they can be very attractive for tourists and represent potential for local development (Serbian Travelers Association, 2022). Although the Tourist Organization of Serbia includes 11 caves in its offer, only two are in the offer for adventure tourists – Ponara and Miroč.

In order to activate natural potentials and increase market competitiveness as adventure tourism destination, the Republic of Serbia must support the development of existing and new products, improve their promotion and marketing, as well as the level of knowledge and skills needed for effective destination management (Milutinović & Vasović, 2017). In addition, it is necessary to mark hiking and biking trails, set up signs and information boards along the trails, provide licensed guides, introduce new adventure activities, design themed routes and encourage local agencies to be interested in this type of tourism (Dimitrovski et al., 2021a).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a severe blow to the world economy, whereas tourism is one of the most affected sectors suffering a massive drop in tourist movements, revenue and employment. Due to the imposed restrictions and the fear of infection, tourists have reduced their travels, especially avoiding crowded places. In such a hostile environment, adventure tourism has the potential, because it involves activities that take place in the nature and in small groups. Activities in the environment have a beneficial effect on the level of physical fitness, stress relief and weight loss. All this raises the level of both individual and collective culture, which in itself creates a new, healthier lifestyle.

Building more resilient and sustainable tourism is one of the key trends that WTTC defined for the future of tourism (WTTC, 2020). Adventure tourism fits into the set future trends. For example, the Adventure Tourism Development Index (ATDI) can be used as a lens into destination resiliency, as pillars *health*, *entrepreneurship* and *humanitarian*, provide important insight into tourism destination's readiness to overcome a public

health crisis. Elements measured within these pillars, such as the number of hospital beds per capita, are likely to become very important factor for tourists in selecting the destination. As the world is facing increasingly severe non-economic crises (health pandemics, climate change or terrorism), it is very important for a destination to be sustainable, healthy and have a long-term management plan in order to remain competitive.

The Republic of Serbia is ranked 26th based on the ADTI in 2020 and is one of the biggest jumpers on the list since 2008 when the index was introduced, mainly due to improvement in *safety* and *humanitarian* pillars, i.e. better basic conditions, from sewage, to hospitality. This rank of the Republic of Serbia is justified by the fact that the country has a lot of natural resources for adventure tourism development. This type of tourism can play a crucial role in increasing tourism spending, reducing unemployment, promoting a healthy lifestyle, protecting and improving natural and cultural resources, and revitalizing Serbia's rural areas (Štetić et al., 2013). In order to activate these potentials and benefits from adventure tourism, it is necessary to increase investment, train licensed guides, mark routes, have more efficient destination management, and better marketing.

The limitation of the paper lays in the fact that the conclusions are made only from the theoretical point of view, without empirical analysis. Future research may be focused on the analysis of adventure tourist traffic data in the selected adventure tourism destinations of the Republic of Serbia. Detailed analysis can be conducted by comparing the share of adventure tourists in the total number of tourists among the Republic of Serbia and other developing countries ranked according to ATDI.

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