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ABSORPTION OF 2007–2013 EU FUNDING FOR UTILIZATION OF NATURAL ASSETS IN RURAL AREAS IN POLAND

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The aim of the paper is to identify the share of rural areas in the absorption of EU funding available for the purposes that are thematically related to natural assets in Poland in 2007–2013. Rural communes and small towns situated beyond the sphere of influence of the agglomeration were classified as rural areas. The paper is based on the data disseminated by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development of the Republic of Poland. Findings presented in this paper show that rural areas were the most significant beneficiaries of the EU funds allocated for utilization of natural assets on a national scale, although some regional differences were also noted. Rural beneficiaries prevailed in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Pomorskie Voivodships, like in the whole of Poland, while in the Dolnośląskie Voivodship their share in utilization of the EU funding allocated for natural assets was the lowest. Financial resources available from the EU funds provided support for rural areas in the field of promotion of the regions, creation of new tourism products and reconstruction of neglected natural and cultural objects. The projects implemented in these regions combined natural, cultural, tourism and educational contents.

Keywords: EU structural funds, natural assets, Poland, rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

Activities undertaken by rural communities to utilize natural assets for the local development yield positive results in the social and economic dimension and they have a positive impact on the state of preservation of natural heritage (Gwiaździńska-Goraj and Goraj, 2013). In the rural milieu, tourism is a socio-economic function in which natural assets are of great significance (Regional Development Opportunities…, 2014). The activities undertaken in tourism sector stimulate other domains of social and economic life, thereby fostering, directly and indirectly, the local economy (Prus and Mejszelis, 2012). Its most important direct effects include: creation of new jobs, emergence of new business entities, improvement of the use of local human resources and many others. As regards indirect effects, tourism – through the increasing demand for food – fosters the development of agriculture, and the growing tourist movement stimulates service industry, local arts and crafts, etc. Thus, this results in a certain cause-and-effect chain, which, if appropriately stimulated, is reflected in social and economic indicators of the areas in which it develops. However, in many cases, natural assets in rural environments still wait to be discovered, and there is a need for the impulse which would enable the transformation of these resources and assets into the goods determining the development of regions. This is the reason why EU funding for projects enabling the utilization of natural assets has a positive impact on the development of rural areas, which is concomitant with the assumptions of the policies of equalization of development opportunities, directed, in particular, to less developed regions. This is important both in relation to rural areas on a national scale, and with respect to the development of the countryside in particular voivodships. Therefore the activities undertaken by the local authority for the utilization of natural assets are very important from the protection and preservation of natural heritage point of view at regional and national levels (The Board of the…, 2005).

The paper investigates the problem of how rural areas in Poland participate in the absorption of the EU funds for utilization of natural assets. The paper therefore presents, in terms of quantity and spatial allocation, the share of rural areas in the absorption of the EU funding for the purposes related to natural assets in Poland in 2007–2013. Rural areas were presented against a background of other types of regions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The analysis of the share of rural areas in the EU funding for the utilization of natural assets in socio-economic development was based on the SIMIK[1] database from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development of the Republic of Poland. As of December 31st, 2014[2] there were 104527 registered contracts for supporting the projects from the EU Structural Funds allocated to Poland under all Operational Programmes 2007–2013(2015)[3]. It was also based on the Author's experience gained during the realization of the project on the utilization of cultural assets in tourism in Mazowieckie Voivodship with the support of EU structural funds (Powęska, 2008). Out of the data from the SIMIK database only those data were taken into consideration which permitted a thematic identification of usability of the project for the analysis, including: the title of the contract, territorial affiliation of the beneficiary, and the level of the EU co-funding available. The data used for this paper permitted an analysis of the share of rural areas in the total funding volume of the projects available for natural assets co-financed by the EU on a national scale and in the particular voivodships. The volume of funding for the projects in the field of tourism assets was contrasted with other types of regions.

From the perspective of the analysis conducted here it is important to identify the spatial range of the particular types of regions. Taking into account the findings of a more in-depth analysis presented by J. Rakowska (2013a) the following regions were distinguished:

- rural areas encompassing rural communes located beyond the sphere of influence of big towns, as well as small towns,
- land counties, located beyond the sphere of influence of big towns,
- city counties - towns having the status of a county,
- external ring of agglomeration - all types of areas (rural municipalities, land counties, small towns) were classified under this category, functionally combined with a big town, located in the sphere of influence of the capitals of voivodships,
- capitals of voivodships.

Among five categories distinguished here, the category of" rural areas" is the most significant one from the perspective of the opportunities of utilization of the potential of natural assets for the development of rural areas, since it directly applies to the areas of the countryside. Apart from rural communes, this category also includes small towns located far from the agglomeration centres. This decision was made due to the fact that the character of these towns is very often similar to that of the neighbouring rural areas. It is only some of these small towns, in particular those characterized by a well-developed function, for example tourism function, that differ from rural areas in terms of socio-economic indicators. The second category which was distinguished for the needs of the present paper includes land counties (powiaty ziemskie) located beyond the sphere of range of influence of the agglomeration. They also play a significant role from the perspective of the development of rural areas, since county centres, which are the service and administrative hinterlands for the surrounding countryside, are at the same time a channel for information and innovation diffusion into the surrounding countryside. In the remaining categories of the areas distinguished here, urban functions are predominant. This applies in particular to the categories of" city counties" and" voivodship capitals." The category of the" external ring of agglomeration" encompasses all the areas that are functionally linked to the voivodship capital, including also rural communes, small towns and land counties that are located there. However, the observations of rural areas over a number of years indicate that, most frequently, they are "bedrooms" for the voivodship capital, and the structure of incomes and of the working people is similar to that of the cities.

RESULTS

In the years 2007–2014 the number of the EU-funded projects implemented in Poland in the field of natural assets amounted to 78 on a national scale[4]. By comparing this number with over one hundred thousand European projects implemented in Poland during those years, one may conclude that the potential of natural assets is insufficiently considered as the development factor in our country. The analysis of the realized EU-funded projects taking into account natural assets allows one to point to a sizeable share of rural areas in this field in the period 2007–2014 (Fig. 1).

[1] www.gov.pl

[2] Under the N + 2 rule UE 2007-2013 Funds may be spent by the end of 2015

[3] Financing and co-financing of projects under the EU funds in 2007–2013 was carried out through Operational Programmes (OP) and programmes of the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC). Those were the following Operational Programmes: OP Infrastructure and Environment, OP Human Capital, OP Innovative Economy, and OP Technical Assistance. There were also 16 regional programmes implemented in individual voivodships. They included: Regional Operational Programme (ROP) for the Dolnośląskie Voivodship, ROP for the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship, ROP for the Lubelskie Voivodship, the Lubuskie Regional Programme, ROP for the Łódzkie Voivodship, the Małopolskie Regional Programme, ROP for the Mazowieckie Voivodship, ROP for the Opolskie Voivodship, ROP for the Podkarpackie Voivodship, ROP for the Podlaskie Voivodship, ROP for the Pomorskie Voivodship, ROP for the Śląskie Voivodship, ROP for the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship, the Warmia and Mazury Regional Operational Programme, the Wielkopolskie Regional Programme and ROP for the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodship. In addition, the Operational Programme - Development of Eastern Poland was realized, since this region is a separate category due to its spatial range.

[4] The SIMIK database prepared by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development (Poland)

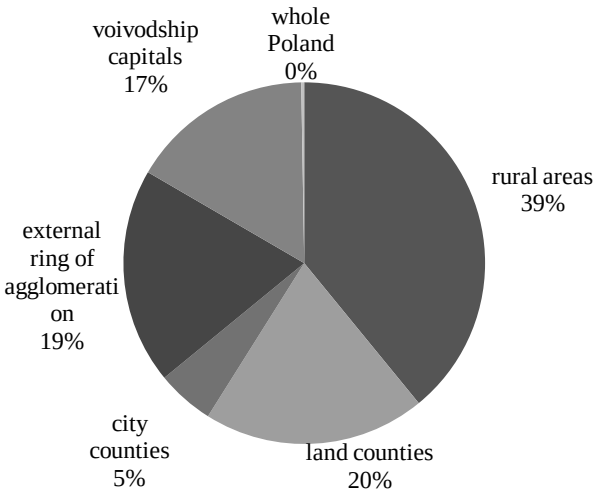

Figure 1. The structure of utilization of EU funds for natural assets in Poland in 2007–2013 (2014) by spatial category
Source: Author's elaboration based on the SIMIK data of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development of the Republic of Poland

This share constituted 39 % and it was the highest index among all types of areas distinguished here. Moreover, taking into account that 20 % of the projects were realized in land counties, functionally linked to rural areas, one may say that the Polish countryside was the main beneficiary of the EU financial support in the field of natural assets. The share of the areas considered urban (in terms of their function) in the EU funding for utilization of natural assets amounted to 41 %. On a national scale, this category was dominated by the localities situated in the zone described as the external ring of agglomeration (17 %). The voivodship capitals managed to absorb 17 % of all projects allocated for the utilization of natural assets for the needs of socio-economic development, while city counties absorbed about 6 % of projects. As regards the share of the particular voivodships in the total volume of the EU funding for the projects related to natural assets, one can see a domination of the Mazovia region (Fig. 2). The region used as much as 47 % of the total amount of funds available for the purposes related to natural assets.

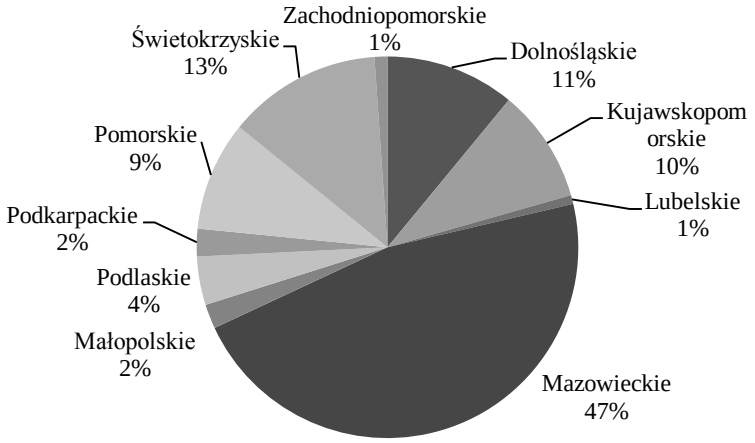

Figure 2. The structure of utilization of EU funds for natural assets in Poland in the years 2007–2013(2014) by voivodships
Source: Author's elaboration based on the SIMIK data of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development of the Republic of Poland

The second group of regions, which utilized from 10 to 15 % of the EU funding, includes the following voivodships: Świętokrzyskie, Dolnośląskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Pomorskie Voivodships. However, in each of the following voivodships: Podlaskie, Podkarpackie, Małopolskie and Zachodniopomorskie, the amount of co-financing constituted less than 5 % of the total value of the EU grants for the purposes relating to natural assets. It should also be noted that in the years 2007–2013 (14) in as many as 6 out of 16 voivodships no EU funds were allocated for the activities related to the utilization of natural assets. The fact that this group of regions encompasses voivodships with a high potential of natural assets (Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Lubuskie, Wielkopolskie) or the voivodships having a significant share of devastated natural assets (Łódzkie, Opolskie, Śląskie) may point to a low level of perception and treatment of these assets as a factor of socio-economic development of these regions.

The share of rural areas in the total amount of the EU funding used in the period 2007–2013 (14) for the purposes relating to natural assets varied widely depending on the voivodship and it ranged from 75 % in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship to 3 % in the Dolnośląskie Voivodship. The analysis of the phenomenon was presented below on the example

of those voivodships in which at least a dozen or so EU-funded projects relating to natural assets were realized. These are the Dolnośląskie, Mazowieckie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Pomorskie Voivodships (Fig. 3).

In the Dolnośląskie Voivodship (Fig. 3A) the projects devoted to the use of natural assets in urban areas were prevalent. About 80 % of the total amount of funds in this field were spent in Wrocław, whereas rural areas and land counties invested a total of 15% of the financial support provided by the EU. This spatial structure of the phenomenon was no doubt influenced by two factors: (1) the character of urban space of Wrocław, which is one of the "greenest" cities in Poland, and (2) a high index of activity and ability to acquire European funds by the municipal authorities of Wrocław, which is very frequently a significant factor of acquiring European Union funds. The analysis of projects realized in the Dolnośląskie Voivodship showed that irrespective of the spatial range of ongoing projects, a considerable number of them focused on the promotion of either the whole voivodship, or a part of it. However, from the perspective of the development of rural areas, projects directly related to the development of a new tourism product deserve special attention. One example is the project completed in the Szczytna Commune in Kłodzko County titled "The organization of cultural events promoting the Szczytno Commune as a centre of cultural, business, active and disabled-friendly tourism", another example is the project realized in Przemków in Polkowice County and entitled "The organization of the Lower Silesian Festival of Wine and Mead as an event promoting cultural and natural assets of the Przemków Commune and of the Lower Silesia region." Projects promoting in particular natural assets in rural areas of the Dolnośląskie Voivodship include: 'The Land of Extinct Volcanoes – Your Place in the Sudeten Mountains" realized in Jawor and "The Festival of the Milicz Carp" in Milicz. Another project worth mentioning was aimed at organizing the external ring of the Wrocław agglomeration:"Around Wrocław – the promotion of the values of natural environment of communes surrounding the agglomeration as a new tourism product of Lower Silesia."

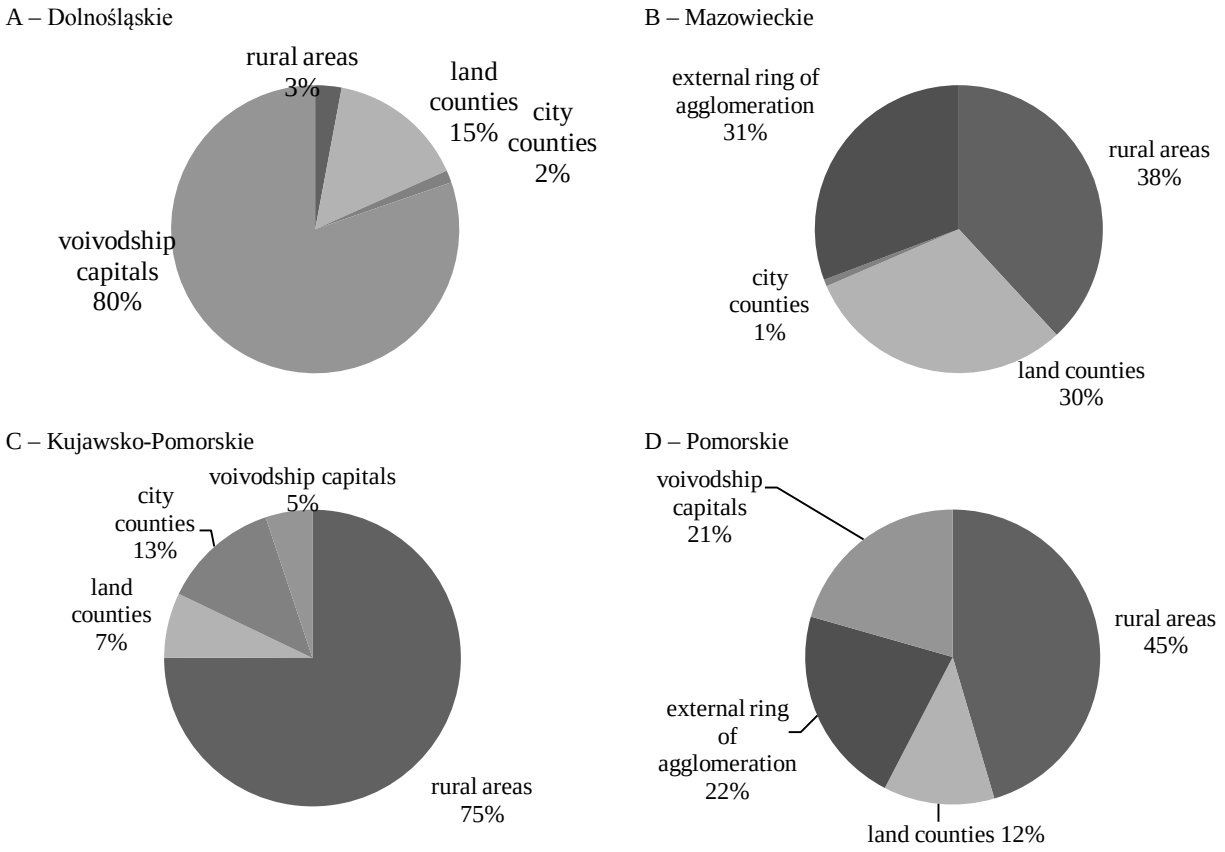

Figure 3. The structure of utilization of the EU funds for natural assets in Poland in 2007–2013(14) in the Voivodships: A–Dolnośląskie, B–Mazowieckie, C–Kujawsko-pomorskie, D–Pomorskie

Source: Author's elaboration based on the SIMIK data of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development of the Republic of Poland

The share of rural areas and land counties in the utilization of EU funding for projects thematically related to natural assets in the Mazovian Voivodship (Fig. 3B) in 2007–2014 was relatively high and it totalled 68 % (rural areas – 38 %, land counties – 30 %). However, territories which were classified as urban (external ring of the agglomeration and city counties) used 32 % of funds. A significant share of rural areas in the use of European funding for the purposes related to natural assets indicates that the authorities of the communes and small towns can see the development potential inherent in natural assets in the Mazovian Voivodship. On the other hand, this is also the reflection of mobility and ability of the authorities of rural administrative units to acquire European Union funds. In the Mazovian Voivodship a large number of projects focused on the creation and development of tourism infrastructure, which no doubt influenced the flow of tourists and the increase in the potential of tourism function. The main projects realized in rural areas were those related thematically to the use of natural assets for the needs of new tourism products, such as the project realized in

Wieniawa in Przysucha County ”Creation of a new tourism product including accommodations (hotel and conference object), catering services (restaurant) and a rental of recreation equipment and the equipment for organizing outdoor events and venues.” This was a significant investment from the viewpoint of searching for new socio-economic functions in the region having a high unemployment rate, which in 2014 was one of the highest in Poland and amounted to 24,7 % (the national average being 11,5 %, and the average for the Voivodship being 9.8 %)[5]. Other projects realized in rural areas of the Mazovia region were devoted to the creation of new tourism products as well as infrastructure construction and development. They included, *inter alia*, the project ”Lipsko park – development of active historical tourism,” realized in Chotcza in Lipsko County, the project realized in the locality of Obryte in Pułtusk County ”Development of water tourism – an opportunity to increase the competitiveness of the Mazovia Region,” or the ”Construction of sports and recreation complex 'The Kurpie Land' on the water reservoir 'Wykrot' and on the Rozoga River in the Myszyniec Commune” in the village of Myszyniec in Ostrołęka County.

In the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship (Fig. 3C) the use of financial resources for the purposes thematically related to natural assets is dominated by rural areas. During the period under consideration 75 % of funds were invested in rural communes. In addition, 7 % of the EU funding allocated to natural assets went to beneficiaries located in land counties. Areas functionally classified as urban regions used 18 % of resources allocated to the Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodship, of which 13 % went to city counties and 5 % went to the city of Bydgoszcz. In the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship all realized projects were aimed at creating new, or supporting already existing tourism products in the field of natural environment. Those were projects that were fully realized in rural areas: ”Development of tourism services based on natural resources”, ”Improvement of road marking and construction of small-scale tourist infrastructure based on the existing networks of pedestrian, bicycle and kayaking trails in the Tuchola Landscape Park”, ”Modernization of the tourist route connecting the locality of Wiele with the Wieleckie Lake Reserve”, ”Modernization of the educational path of Potrzymiech and its adjustment to the bicycle and pedestrian movement together with the enlargement of the didactic garden at the local educational centre in the Potrzymiech Peninsula.” However, projects of special interest are those taking into consideration the factor of natural assets, including: ”The Tucholski Forest – in the labyrinths of nature – enhancement of the position of the Tuchola Region on the tourist map of Poland through the development of tourism infrastructure”, ”Cultural and natural heritage of Kruszwica at Gopło Lake as a base for tourism, recreation, education and sports,” as well as ”Construction of a kayak and bicycle shelter at the seat of the Brodnica Landscape Park and the building of two view terraces in the Marshy Valley of the Drwęca River.”

In the Pomorskie Voivodship (Fig. 3D), like in the case of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship, the share of the rural areas, among all regions under consideration, was the highest one in the EU-funded projects relating to natural assets (45 %). Urban regions absorbed 43 % of the total amount of the EU funds allocated for these purposes. In rural areas the main themes were those relating to the revitalization of park and palace complexes, including, *inter alia*, the completed projects in: Dzierzgoń in Sztum County: ”Revitalization of the city park in Dzierzgoń – the Castle Hill together with its surrounding neighbourhood”, in Czersk in Chojnice county ”Tourism management of the archaeological park and nature reserve The Stone Circles at Odry”, as well as in Prabuty in Kwidzyń County ”The enhancement of tourism attractiveness of the Trail of Powiśle Gothic Castles - construction of a bicycle trail connecting the castle in Malbork with tourist attractions of Malbork, Sztum and Kwidzyń Counties.” Similar themes could be seen in most of the projects in land counties (12 percent of utilized EU funds). Those were, *inter alia*, the following projects: in Człuchów County ”LOUISE – leisure and meditation – revitalization of a historic landscape park LUIZA in Człuchów – elements of a regional tourism product”, as well as in Wejcherowo County ”Restoration of historical and natural assets of the A. Majkowski City Park in Wejcherowo.” In the Pomorskie Voivodship the EU funds were also used to finance the activities permitting the utilization of the region's natural wealth for tourism purposes in a qualified tourism (as is the case of the project ”Making accessible the Areas of Protected Landscape for tourists: the Radunia River Valley and Żuławy Gdańskie (Gdańsk Marshland) for kayaking through the construction of tourism infrastructure on the Radunia River”), as well as the realization of educational objectives linked to the protection of nature in the region (for example, ”Sustainable educational and tourism accessibility to the naturally valuable areas in the Bytów Lakeland”).

In the voivodships in which the number of realized projects was relatively small (up to 5 projects), EU funds were allocated, first and foremost, to those investments in which the following factors played a significant role: protection of natural heritage, promotion of the region, tourism activation and development of the existing objects and tourism products. It is worth emphasizing that the realized projects are extremely important both from the perspective of socio-economic development of rural areas and from the viewpoint of nature protection and conservation. Here are the examples of the projects combining the implementation of the above-mentioned objectives: (1) in Zwierzyniec, Lubelskie Voivodship, ”Restoration of the historic water and palace complex combined with tourism management”, (2) in Ciężkowice, Małopolskie Voivodship – ”Creation of a brand tourism product in the Highlands of Ciężkowice – ”Around the Petrified City”, as well as (3) in Busko County, Świętokrzyskie Voivodship ”At the sources of full power – a campaign for tourist promotion of the communes of the South Nida River Basin: Nowy Korczyn, Pacanów, Solec-Zdrój, Stopnica and Wiślica.”

CONCLUSIONS

Findings of the analysis presented in the paper indicate that rural areas were the main beneficiaries of the EU funds allocated for the utilization of natural assets in the scale of the whole country. At the same time, some regional differences

[5] www.stat.gov.pl

were revealed in this field. Among voivodships in which rural communes and small towns were the main recipients of the EU funds for purposes relating to natural assets were Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Pomorskie, which are characterized by a vast natural potential. In the Dolnośląskie Voivodship, however, the city of Wrocław was the biggest recipient of the EU funds used for natural assets, which is associated with a high share of greenery in the city's urban space. Funds acquired from the European Union provided support for rural areas in the promotion of regions, creation of new tourism products, as well as the reconstruction of neglected natural and cultural objects. The realized projects combined natural, cultural, tourism and educational contents. It must be emphasized, however, that as many as 6 out of 16 regions of Poland did not participate in the EU financial support for the activities aimed at utilizing natural assets.

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