

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF SARAJEVO'S OLYMPIC MOUNTAINS - A TOURISM AREA LIFE CYCLE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Sarajevo Olympic mountains, Bjelašnica, Igman, Jahorina, and Trebević represent a valuable physical-geographical and tourism resource of Bosnia and Herzegovina, characterized by winter tourism. Their development has been shaped by complex historical, political, and social processes, with the 1984 Winter Olympic Games marking the culmination of infrastructural and tourism prosperity, followed by wartime devastation and post-war institutional fragmentation that resulted in prolonged stagnation. This paper applies Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model to examine the evolution of tourism function in these mountain areas. Through a combination of historical-geographical approach and qualitative sources, this paper analyzes spatial and functional changes, as well as challenges related to sustainability, management, and institutional coordination. The Sarajevo Olympic mountains do not represent a textbook example of the TALC model, as their development has not followed a linear path; instead, growth phases were often interrupted by external factors such as war, political-administrative structure, and climate change. A particular challenge lies in the inconsistency of statistical data, which complicates precise identification of developmental stages. Although the mountains share similar patterns of exploration, growth, stagnation, and decline, each has followed a specific development path determined by infrastructural, socio-political, and economic conditions. The findings indicate that the future tourism development of the Sarajevo mountains should be oriented towards sustainability, rational use of natural resources, and the development of selective tourism products, supported by improved institutional coordination and more consistent statistical records.

Keywords: tourism development, tourism area life cycle, Olympic mountains

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism can be described as a form of tourism that is developed and maintained in a specific area in such a way and to such an extent that it remains viable over an unlimited period of time, without causing degradation or significant change to the human and natural environment, nor jeopardizing the development and well-being of other activities and processes (Butler, 1993). The UNWTO has emphasized that sustainable tourism should: make optimal use of environmental resources that are key to tourism development, while preserving essential ecological processes and protecting natural heritage and biodiversity; respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, safeguard their cultural heritage and traditional values, while promoting intercultural understanding and tolerance; and ensure long-term sustainable economic operations by providing fairly distributed socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, including stable employment, income-generating opportunities, and social services, thereby contributing to poverty reduction (UNWTO, 2013).

Mountain areas, traditionally characterized by depopulation and lower levels of development, particularly in developing countries, have increasingly recognized tourism as a key development opportunity in recent years. In these areas, sustainable tourism enables the development of tourism activities that do not endanger fragile environments or local communities (Karim, 2022), whose unique culture and intangible heritage constitute a crucial part of the tourism supply, contributing to the preservation of authentic customs and everyday practices while simultaneously enhancing the value of the natural environment (Sgroi, 2020).

Bosnia and Herzegovina possesses strong potential for the development of sustainable tourism due to its natural assets, diverse landscapes, and rich biodiversity. In this regard, high-mountain and rural areas stand out as particularly important elements of tourism valorization (Lugonja, 2014). Bjelašnica, Igman, Jahorina, and Trebević, together with the city of Sarajevo, hosted the XIV Winter Olympic Games in 1984, which further highlighted their infrastructural importance and symbolic value.

Bobsleigh and luge competitions were held on Trebević, ski jumping, cross-country skiing, and biathlon on Igman, men's alpine skiing events on Bjelašnica, and women's alpine skiing events on Jahorina. After the Olympic Games, Bjelašnica retained a key role in the development of winter sports, hosting a number of international competitions under the auspices of the FIS (Hadrović, 2020).

The development of the Sarajevo mountains (Bjelašnica, Igman, Jahorina, and Trebević), from a period of great popularity through the challenges brought by wartime events and post-socialist transition processes, reflects the dynamism and

complexity of this area, while simultaneously highlighting contemporary efforts toward revitalization and the preservation of tourism and cultural potential. Despite their unique natural characteristics and rich cultural-historical heritage, the resources of the Olympic mountains have still not been fully valorized. Their sustainable development is threatened by processes of apartmentization and uncontrolled urbanization, which lead to excessive construction and spatial degradation, as well as by climate change, which reduces the reliability of snow cover and threatens the future of winter tourism. At the same time, mass tourism creates additional pressure on ecosystems and infrastructure. Nevertheless, with strategic planning and a careful balance between economic development and the preservation of natural and social frameworks, these mountains have significant potential for the development of selective and year-round forms of tourism.

In the context of these complex development processes and patterns, the aim of this research is to analyze the tourism development of the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains using Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model. Special attention is given to the historical phases of development, interruptions in tourism growth, and challenges related to spatial planning and the management of these mountain areas.

STUDY AREA

The mountain area of Bjelašnica (highest peak: Zvezdarnica, 2,066 m a.s.l.) and Igman (Crni Vrh, 1,504 m a.s.l.) is located in the central part of the Dinarides, which belong to the western sector of the Mediterranean zone of young fold mountains. These two morphologically distinct units are connected by the morphodepressions of Malo and Veliko Polje. Bjelašnica extends southwest of Sarajevo toward the Prenj massif, from which it is separated by the Neretva River. Its boundaries are defined by the Sarajevo Plain along the Zujevina River to the north; the Željeznica River and the eastern part of the Sarajevo Plain to the east; Mount Hojta to the southeast; the deep canyon of the Rakitnica River to the south; and the Neretva River valley to the southwest.

From the southern and southwestern sides, this mountain complex is sharply delimited by the canyons of the Rakitnica and Neretva rivers, while to the northwest it is connected via the Ivan Saddle to Mount Bitovnja, and to the southeast, across Hojta, it links with Mount Treskavica (Mihic 1984). Mount Igman represents the northeastern branch of the Bjelašnica massif and is characterized by an undulating, gently rolling surface aligned with the Dinaric direction, with an average elevation of 1,300 to 1,400

meters. On its northern side, it descends steeply toward the Sarajevo Plain, and on the western side toward the valley of the Zujevina River.⁴

The mountain area of Jahorina together with Trebević is located southeast of the Sarajevo Basin. Geomorphologically, the Jahorina massif consists of three units: Gola Jahorina, Ravna Planina, and Trebević. Trebević and Jahorina do not constitute a fully unified morphogenetic area, partly due to the indistinct boundaries between these mountains. A high mountain plateau with the peaks Mali and Veliki Stupanj and Mali and Veliki Crni Vrh marks the boundary between the mentioned massifs (Popović, 1935), while Mount Ogorjelica (1,916 meters) represents the highest point of Jahorina. To the north, the branches of Jahorina gradually descend via Ravna Planina into the Pale Basin, which separates the massif from Romanija (Golijanin, 2010). From the northwestern side, the Jahorina massif connects with Trebević, whose slopes continue toward the Sarajevo Plain through the areas of Miljevići and Lukavica (Mihčić, 1987).

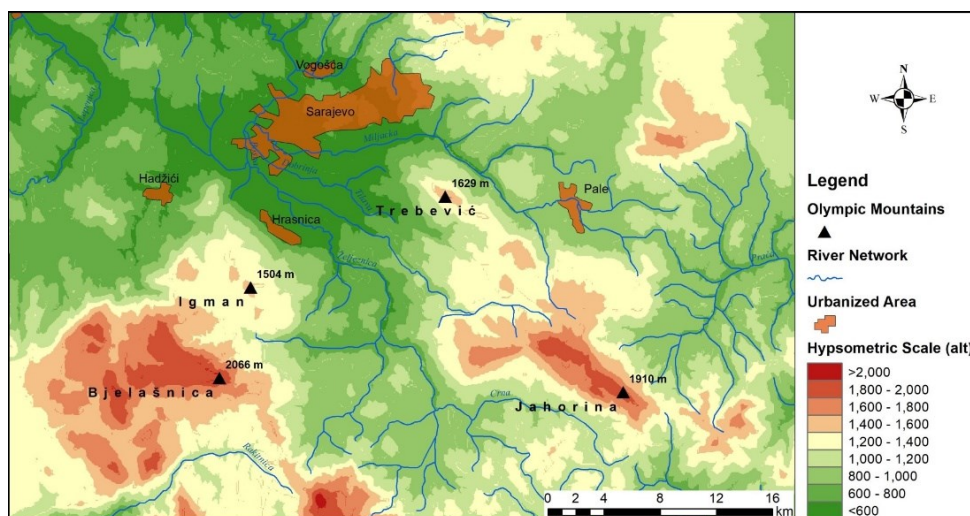


Fig. 1. Geographical location of the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains

⁴ <https://www.dinarskogorje.com/igman.html>

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of the research is based on the application of Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model as a conceptual framework, which was used to identify the developmental stages of the mountain tourism destinations of Bjelašnica, Igman, Jahorina, and Trebević. According to Butler (1980), the tourism life cycle consists of six stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, or rejuvenation.

However, it is important to emphasize that the model cannot be applied in a strictly linear manner; rather, it represents an analytical lens for examining long-term spatial and functional changes, while taking into account key political, socio-economic, and structural transformations, as well as changes in tourism demand patterns. A similar approach has been applied in numerous other studies, such as Berry (2000), Zhong et al. (2008), Šulc (2016), Banda (2020), Ramón-Cardona and Sánchez-Fernández (2024), and Banda et al. (2026), which further confirms the relevance and applicability of the TALC model.

This research adopts a historical–geographical approach, combining qualitative analysis of secondary sources with a comparative interpretation of tourism development trajectories on the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains. Due to the scarcity and incompleteness of tourism statistics, particularly in the post-war period, the definition of TALC phases is primarily based on qualitative indicators, including changes in space and infrastructure, governance structures, the intensity of investments, and the significance of tourism in the local and regional economy. Available statistical data were used as supportive evidence rather than as decisive factors in determining the phases.

Although the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains share similar geographical characteristics and a common Olympic legacy, their post-war development has differed significantly. In order to analyze similarities and differences in the development of individual mountain areas, the method of comparative analysis was employed, taking into account the shared geographical and historical context, with particular emphasis on key historical events such as the XIV Winter Olympic Games in 1984 and the war of 1992–1995.

Field research was conducted on Bjelašnica, Igman, Jahorina, and Trebević, involving data collection through direct observation and photo documentation, with a particular focus on the condition of existing infrastructure, accommodation capacities, and the construction of new facilities.

RESULTS

Development phases of Sarajevo's Olympic mountains

Although more detailed analyses of the life cycles of the studied mountain destinations are not possible due to the lack of statistical data, the development of the tourism function of the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains has been interpreted in the scientific literature through various periodizations. In this paper, the periodization of mountain area development defined by Banda et al. (2026) is adopted as the reference framework:

- Phase I – from 1878 (the arrival of Austro-Hungarian administration) to 1939 (the outbreak of the Second World War);
- Phase II – from 1945 (the end of the Second World War) to the hosting of the Winter Olympic Games in 1984;
- Phase III – from 1985 to 1992 (the onset of the war period, 1992–1995);
- Phase IV – from 1996 to 2000 (the post-war period);
- Phase V – from 2001 (the contemporary period);
 - Sub-phase I (2001–2010);
 - Sub-phase II (from the 2010s to the present).

The characteristics of the developmental phases of the studied mountain areas are presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1. Characteristics of the developmental phases of the studied mountain areas

Development phase	Phase characteristics
Phase I	– The initial phase of organized recreational and tourism movements in mountain areas during the period of Austro-Hungarian administration – Intensification of the construction of transport and mountaineering infrastructure, alongside the parallel development of mountaineering and tourism literature and cartography – Mountaineering societies as key institutional actors in shaping the early recreational offer and organizing excursion activities – Predominance of summer recreational activities, driven by low costs of stay and preferential conditions in railway transport – Gradual activation of mountain areas in the vicinity of urban centers as dominant recreational zones – The beginnings of winter recreational and tourism activities through the emergence of skiing, the organization of events, and the construction of the first mountaineering facilities
Phase II	– War destruction during the Second World War and the post-war reconstruction of mountaineering infrastructure (1946–1952), including mountain lodges, trails, and basic communal facilities – Quantitative growth in visits and overnight stays in mountaineering facilities, particularly on Bjelašnica and Igman, indicating the strengthening of the recreational and tourism function of the mountains – Development of recreational and competitive skiing from the late 1950s, accompanied by the organization of local competitions, courses, and events – Differentiation of development trajectories among the mountains: Jahorina emerges as an organized winter center (involvement phase according to Butler), while Bjelašnica and Igman lag behind in infrastructural terms – Gradual improvement of transport, technical, and tourism infrastructure, alongside the beginnings of spatially unplanned weekend-house construction

	– The Winter Olympic Games as a key development impulse, creating the infrastructural foundation for more intensive development of winter mountain tourism and the expansion of the contractive zone
Phase III	– The Winter Olympic Games as a key development catalyst, which in the early 1980s significantly transformed the landscape and the economic role of the Olympic mountains – The establishment of the Bjelašnica–Igman Olympic Center and the profiling of the mountains as developed winter tourism destinations, alongside the gradual introduction of selective summer forms of tourism – Diversification of the tourism supply through sports-recreational, congress, and training-related sports activities, accompanied by an extension of the tourist season and increased visitation – Differentiated development patterns: Jahorina enters Butler’s expansion (development) phase, while Bjelašnica and Igman transition from the involvement phase toward the development phase, with identified spatial and functional shortcomings
Phase IV	– During the war period of 1992–1995, mountain tourism infrastructure suffered extensive destruction, with the complete devastation of facilities on Bjelašnica and Igman, partial damage on Jahorina, and landmine contamination of the Trebević area. – In the post-war period (1996–2000), partial reconstruction of key infrastructure and ski facilities on Bjelašnica–Igman began, accompanied by a slow and uneven recovery of Jahorina and Trebević, as well as limited use of these areas due to security and technical constraints.
Phase V	Sub-phase I – Dominance of winter tourism in the first sub-phase, characterized by pronounced seasonality, limited diversification of activities, and a high dependence of seasonal performance on snowfall – Infrastructural and functional constraints (inadequate ski slopes, traffic congestion, climatic conditions, and competition from regional centers) slowing the recovery

	of Bjelašnica, Igman, and Jahorina – Complex and fragmented institutional and governance models (ZOI '84 and OC Jahorina) hindering coordinated development and the formation of a unified “Olympic Mountains” destination – Increasing pressures from apartmentization, urbanization, and unplanned development, accompanied by a growing need to balance tourism development with the preservation of natural values – Unreliability of official tourism statistics (unregistered accommodation, day visitors, non-categorized facilities) complicating a realistic assessment of tourist flows and the economic effects of tourism
	Sub-phase II – Intensive infrastructure investments and growth in tourist traffic, particularly on Jahorina, which has been reaffirmed as the leading ski resort in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Reaffirmation of Trebević after 2018 through the reconstruction of the cable car, the development of recreational facilities, and the valorization of cultural and historical heritage – Gradual infrastructural and promotional advances on Bjelašnica and Igman, accompanied by an increase in apartment-type accommodation and growing interest from foreign visitors – Attempts to diversify the tourism supply (summer activities, events, rural and event tourism), while maintaining a dominant orientation toward winter tourism – Pronounced development challenges: uncontrolled apartmentization, urbanization, pressures from mass tourism, and climate change

Source: authors, based on the research of Banda and Opačić (2017) and Banda (2026).

Interpretation of development phases through the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model

The combination of a favorable geographical position (proximity to the capital city), the valorization of natural attraction resources, and the development of transport and tourism infrastructure, along with an increase in accommodation capacity, enabled the Olympic mountains to pass through most of the stages of Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle over a multi-decadal period (Table 2). In this study, the stages of Butler's model are treated as interpretative, meaning that development phases are not viewed as a strictly linear sequence, but rather as a process characterized by regressions, prolonged stages, and interruptions conditioned by external factors. Consequently, these mountain areas do not represent textbook examples of Butler's destination life cycle, particularly with regard to the clear delineation of individual development stages. In this context, no consolidation phase was identified in the development of the studied mountain areas, as the incompleteness of tourism statistics prevents a reliable assessment of whether accommodation capacity or the capacity of tourism attraction resources has been exceeded.

Tab. 2. Comparison of development phases with Butler's TALC stages

Development phase	Bjelašnica–Igman	Jahorina	Trebević
Phase I	○	○	○
Phase II	△	△→	△→
Phase III	▲	▲	▲
Phase IV	≈	≈	≈
Phase V (I)	↓	≈→	↓ (2001–2017)
Phase V (II)	↑	↑	↑ (2018–)

Source: adapted by the authors

Legend:

○ exploration; △ involvement; ▲ development; ≈ stagnation; ↓ decline; ↑ rejuvenation; → arrow indicates transitional characteristics toward the subsequent TALC stage.

The tourism development of the Olympic mountains to date has been the result of the interaction of both external and internal factors. The most important external factors include the war events of 1992–1995, the political–administrative division into entities, and increasingly evident climate change. The emergence of competing destinations with similar tourism offerings should also be highlighted (Banda et al., 2026).

The war events of 1992–1995 represent a turning point in development. The consequences of the war, including the presence of landmines, caused severe damage to the tourism infrastructure of the Olympic mountains and led to the stagnation of these destinations. Post-war reconstruction proceeded slowly, which further contributed to the obsolescence of the tourism product. In the cases of Jahorina and Trebević, the political–administrative division into entities additionally complicated destination management in the contemporary period. Such development disruptions indicate that, in the case of the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains, transitions between the phases of Butler’s model do not occur in a continuous manner, but are instead characterized by abrupt regressions and prolonged retention in stages of stagnation and decline.

Bjelašnica and Igman are characterized by a relatively typical development trajectory, encompassing an exploration phase in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, followed by phases of involvement and intensive development, which culminated during the XIV Winter Olympic Games in 1984. These phases were succeeded by periods of stagnation and decline caused by war-related destruction and prolonged insufficient investment. Only after 2010 did a phase of revitalization begin, marked by investments in ski infrastructure, hotel facilities, and additional sports and recreational amenities.

By contrast, Jahorina stands out as the mountain destination with the most dynamic development pace. In the period from 1945 to 1984, it transitioned from the involvement phase to the development phase, driven by the expansion of winter ski tourism and intensive infrastructural investments. Following the Olympic development peak and wartime devastation, the destination remained in a phase of stagnation during the 2001–2010 period, albeit with clear tendencies toward revitalization (Table 2). Since 2010, a new investment cycle has triggered the modernization of cable car systems, the expansion of accommodation capacities, and the development of new tourism facilities, thereby consolidating Jahorina’s position as the leading ski resort in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Trebević exhibits the most distinctive development pattern. Until 1992, its trajectory largely mirrored that of the other Olympic mountains, progressing through the

exploration and involvement phases and into the development phase, which reached its peak with the construction of the bobsleigh track for the XIV Winter Olympic Games in 1984. However, war-related destruction and long-term security issues, including landmine contamination and infrastructure abandonment, resulted in a prolonged phase of decline that lasted until 2017. A turning point and the beginning of revitalization is identified in 2018, when the Trebević cable car was reconstructed and reopened, symbolically and functionally marking the mountain's return to Sarajevo's active tourism offer (Banda et al., 2026).

Within the framework of Butler's model, this development process can be interpreted as a phase of partial revitalization, largely limited to excursion and recreational activities. The portion of Trebević located within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has held protected area status since 2014, which has further directed the mountain's development toward outdoor tourism. The renewed connection with the urban core has resulted in an increase in visitor numbers, improvements in tourism infrastructure, and the expansion of the gastronomic and hospitality offer.

Sub-phase II (from the 2010s to the present) represents the current stage of development of the analyzed mountain destinations. In this context, Jahorina clearly stands out due to strong investment activity, which has enabled its positioning as an international tourism destination. In contrast, Bjelašnica and Igman record a more moderate pace of development, predominantly characterized by the growth of apartment-type accommodation and a stronger reliance on the domestic market, while Trebević, owing to the reconstruction of the cable car and the improvement of excursion areas, functions primarily as a destination for day trips and short-term visits. At the same time, in the part of Trebević that administratively belongs to the Republika Srpska, a more intensive development of apartment and other accommodation capacities has been recorded, indicating spatially differentiated tourism development as well as a lack of cooperation and a shared development vision among the responsible authorities.

The common development challenges faced by all analyzed mountains relate to pronounced urbanization, the seasonality of tourism demand, and the insufficient valorization of summer and year-round forms of tourism. Differences in the intensity and directions of development suggest that the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains, although situated within the same temporal framework, occupy different positions within Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle, further confirming the heterogeneous and non-linear nature of their tourism development.

The challenges of tourism development in the Olympic mountains are multiple and complex. Insufficient integration of tourism products and services into

multidestination packages, along with the limited use of existing natural and cultural resources, negatively affects their market competitiveness. An additional problem is pronounced seasonality, given that the largest share of tourist traffic is generated during the winter ski season. Although detailed statistical data on the average length of stay in the mountains are not available, field observations indicate that Jahorina attracts longer stays during the winter season, while Bjelašnica, Igman, and Trebević primarily function as destinations for shorter and weekend visits.

DISCUSSION

To accelerate the revitalization of the Olympic mountains and their surrounding areas, development should be more strongly oriented toward selective forms of tourism that can complement the dominant winter tourism offer and extend the length of the tourist season.

On Bjelašnica, further improvements are needed in the network of hiking and excursion routes passing through the mountain villages, while areas such as Kotlovi offer strong potential for the development of adventure tourism. Lukomir and Umoljani are recognized as rural tourism destinations, but they require better organization and promotion, as well as improvements in transport infrastructure. On Igman, Veliko Polje stands out as a traditional excursion area; however, there is a clear need for the development of basic infrastructure, including sanitary facilities, rest areas, and waste disposal facilities.

As part of the broader development framework defined by the Sustainable Development Strategy of the Municipality of Trnovo for the period 2023–2027, a strategic project of the Municipality of Trnovo was implemented in 2024, involving the construction of the Trnovo Business and Sports Center near Babin Do. Within the planning period up to 2027, one of the key infrastructure improvement and development projects of the Municipality of Ilidža is the construction of a cable car linking the settlement of Hrasnica with the Olympic mountain Igman (Development Strategy of the Municipality of Ilidža for the period 2022–2027, 2023).

Jahorina also has the potential to further develop a year-round tourism offer through the expansion of excursion zones and additional adventure tourism facilities, while Trebević, as previously noted, has already become a popular excursion destination for both the local population and international visitors, largely due to the operation of the cable car.

Strategy of the Republika Srpska Tourism Development for the period 2021–2027 (2021) defines the Jahorina tourism area, with the Jahorina Ski Center as its core

attraction and complementary tourism attractions such as the Orlovača Cave, the Miljacka Waterfall, the Prača Canyon etc., all of which have the potential to be positioned on regional and international markets.

CONCLUSION

The studied mountain areas are characterized by certain specific features in their development. The Olympic massifs of Bjelašnica with Igman and Jahorina with Trebević, due to the construction of accommodation facilities and tourism infrastructure, had the prerequisites for the development of mass ski tourism, which represented their main development orientation until the outbreak of the war in 1992–1995. The war, as an external factor beyond the control of the destinations, brought about numerous negative changes, and after 1996 these destinations found themselves in an unfavorable position.

The application of Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model, although useful, has certain methodological limitations, as development phases in practice do not always unfold linearly nor fully correspond to the theoretical pattern. Nevertheless, the application of Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model has proven valuable for the analysis of long-term tourism development in the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains. However, the results confirm that in post-war destinations with complex spatial and political dynamics, the model should be interpreted flexibly, with particular attention to interrupted and non-linear development processes.

For the Sarajevo Olympic Mountains, selective forms of tourism represent an opportunity for revitalization and improved positioning on the tourism market. Selective tourism development implies sustainable tourism, which would have positive effects on the population of mountain areas and contribute to the improvement of environmental conditions.

The conducted research is also subject to certain limitations. The most significant relates to the lack of comprehensive tourism statistics for mountain areas, while the presence of the grey economy further complicates reliable assessments of tourism development stages.

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