








Article

Sustainability of Serbian Villages in COVID-19 Pandemic Conditions

Tamara Lukić ¹, Tatjana Pivac ¹, Milica Solarević ^{1,*}, Ivana Blešić ^{1,2}, Jelena Živković ³, Ivana Penjišević ⁴, Rajko Golić ⁵, Bojana Kalenjuk Pivarski ¹, Milka Bubalo-Živković ¹ and Ana Pandžić ¹

¹ Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Trg Dositeja Obradovića 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia; tamara.kovacevic@dgt.uns.ac.rs (T.L.); tatjana.pivac@dgt.uns.ac.rs (T.P.); ivana.blesic@dgt.uns.ac.rs (I.B.); bojana.kalenjuk@dgt.uns.ac.rs (B.K.P.); milka.bubalo.zivkovic@dgt.uns.ac.rs (M.B.-Ž.); ana.pandzic75@gmail.com (A.P.)

² Institute of Sports, Tourism and Service, South Ural State University, 454080 Chelyabinsk, Russia

³ Department of Geography, Faculty of Sciences and Mathematics, University of Niš, Višegradska 33, 18000 Niš, Serbia; jelena.zivkovic@pmf.edu.rs

⁴ Faculty of Sciences and Mathematics, University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica, Lole Ribara 29, 38220 Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia; ivana.penjisevic@pr.ac.rs

⁵ Faculty of Geography, University of Belgrade, Studentski trg 3/III, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia; rajko.golic@gef.bg.ac.rs

* Correspondence: milica.solarevic@dgt.uns.ac.rs; Tel.: +381-21-485-2839

Abstract: The subject of this paper is to determine how the COVID-19 virus pandemic affected the situation in Serbian villages. The task of the paper is to show the positive and negative consequences that resulted from the pandemic. This would indicate that some of them may represent a new idea, a chance, or would work in favor of the sustainability of the villages of Serbia. In support of objectivity, research was carried out among the population that inhabits the rural areas of Serbia. It examined the extent to which internationally recognized phenomena and consequences of the COVID-19 virus pandemic were present in the study area and considered the nature of their impact on sustainability. The results of the semi-structured questionnaire were processed using descriptive statistics, t-test, and analysis of variance (ANOVA). Respondents contributed to the conception of possible solutions with their comments. The obtained differences in the answers resulted from different socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, but also from the fact that the villages of Serbia differ in natural and social characteristics. Respondents' responses are in favor of economic and sociodemographic sustainability, but they do not think in terms of environmental sustainability. The paper reveals several development opportunities, which complement each other and contribute to different methods for sustainability of rural villages in Serbia.

Keywords: Serbia; countryside; COVID-19 pandemic; sustainability; rural renaissance



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1. Introduction

Since its appearance at the end of 2019, the COVID-19 virus pandemic has necessitated certain changes in numerous segments of life [1–3]. Whether these changes affect life in rural areas of Serbia is one of the issues addressed in this paper. Scientists have been trying for decades to point out the problems that negatively affect the sustainability of the village, among which depopulation stands out [4–6]. The daily 'Novosti' [7] states that there are villages in which no cases of infection were recorded in the first nine months of the pandemic. Are villages safer and healthier places to live? Is there any hope that depopulation can be mitigated by the fact that the rural population will less often decide to move to densely populated cities, by the fact that a portion of those who emigrated will return to their native places, or even that a portion of the new, urban population will relocate? The paper focuses on Serbia, which is at the contact of the Balkan Peninsula and Pannonian Plain. For centuries, it has been an unavoidable space, in terms of all the unfortunate events on the European continent. It is a small European country, in terms of area (88,361 square kilometers) and population (7.1 million inhabitants) [8]. According to

Mitrović [4], who refers to the last census from 2011, the rural population makes up 40.6% and the agricultural population only 6.8% of the total population. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Serbia has approached the problem extremely responsibly, studiously, strategically, and in an organized manner. It called experts from China for help [9] and started purchasing all medical equipment that helps protect against and treat the virus [10]. It tried to procure as many tests as possible to identify the presence of the virus, in addition to respirators and vaccines. From June 2021, Serbia begins the production of the Sputnik V vaccine in Serbia, at the 'The Torlak Institute of Virology, Vaccines and Serums' [11]. In the fight against the pandemic, Serbia also had the help of others. UNICEF [12] describes the assistance it provided to Serbian children in health care, as well as in the education sector.

Governments can invest financial support to restructure the current unstable system exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to calls for conservation bailouts that improve socio-ecological resilience [13]. The Government of Serbia is working on redesigning the system because, since the beginning of the pandemic, it has provided financial support to the adult population [14], as well as to certain activities and social groups that are considered to be most endangered by the pandemic, such as pensioners, the unemployed, hoteliers, travel agencies, and hospitality workers, etc. [15,16].

Based on the results of field observations and population surveys, the aim of the paper was to analyze the situation and most obvious consequences that the villages of Serbia have experienced since the beginning of the pandemic. Respondents helped suggest possible solutions. Subsequently, the issue of sustainability was discussed from the ecological, economic, socio-demographic, and cultural aspects. It is assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic will work in favor of the ecological, economic, and socio-demographic, as well as cultural sustainability of rural areas in Serbia. The paper contributes to a better knowledge of rural areas of Serbia, in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It sees similarities with other rural areas that can be read in the recent scientific literature. The paper pays special attention to the positive outcomes caused by the pandemic. The results reveal the opinion of the inhabitants of rural areas of Serbia on the effects of the pandemic on environmental, economic, socio-demographic, and cultural sustainability. Based on that, there will be some further interregional comparisons.

2. Literature Review and Main Hypothesis

Few academics focus on the crisis's effects, challenges, and potential prospects for rural communities [17]. As Mueller et al. [18] mentioned, very little research has examined its impact on rural populations. That is what this paper will try to contribute to the scientific community.

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a devastating impact on rural populations, with considerable negative consequences on employment, overall life satisfaction, mental health, and economic outlook [18].

De Luca et al. [17] write that the present COVID-19 pandemic poses a bigger threat to rural areas than to metropolitan areas, posing challenges worsened by limited financial resources, inaccessible health care, and increased isolation.

Phillipson et al. [19] concluded that this disease affects all parts of rural society, both directly when people from rural communities become ill and indirectly through the social distancing limitations in place to slow the disease's progression. Social distancing measures were recommended as a preventative measure against the spread of infection but in the economic sense around the world, as is learned from the works of Francesconi [20], they negatively affected life.

The first hypothesis (H1) says that the mentioned negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were observed and present in rural areas of Serbia. That is, the pandemic caused equal problems and, thus, made state borders meaningless.

Mueller et al. [18] found that half of rural respondents see some amount of negative impact on their overall lives as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, and that evaluations of local economic health had declined considerably. Rural residents require ongoing

support for physical and mental health care, jobs, social insurance, and public confidence in the economy. Significant increases in unemployment, increased usage of unemployment insurance, negative effects on mental health, and current poor evaluations of local economic health show rural areas' vulnerabilities. Phillipson et al. [19] wrote that it is influencing household incomes and rural companies in every sector of Europe's diversified rural economies, as well as philanthropic and community groups.

The second hypothesis says that there must be evident changes in different segments of agricultural activity (H2). Many industries and firms were compelled to take drastic measures, including employment layoffs and, in some cases, outright shutdowns [21]. Thus, in the rural parts of Serbia, there was a dilemma over whether it was worse to have a job and be threatened by the virus or to lose your job.

Unlike many 'natural disasters', when the loss of assets is the primary cause of a collapse phase, the COVID-19 pandemic largely damaged human livelihoods as a result of the 'lockdown' tactics implemented to stop the virus from spreading [22]. The WHO [23] outlined a guideline for governments that want to lift lockdown or restrictions, containing six criteria. In some countries, they have turned to lockdown scenario analyses [24]. Although Serbia also had a lockdown phase, it focused on overcoming the problem with vaccination. With the advent and application of the vaccine, further lockdowns are not in consideration.

Rural economies' durability and adaptation have been highlighted in previous crises. Mitrović [4] also noted the paradoxical circumstance that the villages of Serbia, relatively behind the city, find it relatively easier to bear the general social backwardness and survive crises and falls more painlessly. In the conditions of rebooting, they are slower to 'wake up' and harder to start without direct incentives from the state and global society. During the research, a certain competitiveness of rural territory, which is provided in relation to the restrictions imposed by the prevention and fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, was noticed. People living in small flats in densely populated cities are increasingly appreciating landscape enjoyment, safe local food production and delivery, the potential of social separation, and accessible open public spaces, which were formerly undervalued [25]. Stojanović and Vukov [26] state that young people pointed out that it was easier to live in the countryside during the restriction of movement and social distancing. There were numerous possibilities for socializing in the open space. There were no fears or major disturbances in the normalcy of life. Everyone was careful, respected distances, and 'took care that the virus did not enter the village'. This made life difficult only for young people working in nearby larger towns, due to problems with transportation, social contacts, and the functioning of production.

Based on this, the third hypothesis (H3) says that the chance of the village's sustainability lies in the fact that, due to its characteristics, it facilitates life under pandemic conditions.

The fourth hypothesis (H4) says that, regarding the regional differences in natural characteristics of Serbia [27,28] and the distance of cities to which young people aspire [29], it was assumed that the largest differences in responses would be found among respondents from different parts of the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic also has its positive sides. In some parts of the world, the pandemic has given rise to positive social changes that have given importance to and helped emancipate unjustly marginalized sections of society. Banerjee [30] draws attention to women who are fighting in curbing the crisis amidst the deluge of fear and negativity.

In Serbia, tourism is mentioned as the greatest opportunity for rural sustainability [31–34]. The COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to move across borders (tests are required, vaccination confirmation, some countries are temporarily closing borders, requiring several days of quarantine, etc.) [35]. It indirectly directs people who want a vacation to domestic destinations [36]. Is the COVID-19 pandemic an accelerator of the rural renaissance, as theorized by Marsden [37], Ivanko and Kivist [38], and others?

The fifth hypothesis (H5) says that Serbia envisages its formula for the rural renaissance.

According to De Luca [17], some rural communities are considering creating co-working spaces with high-speed internet connections to accommodate digital and nomad workers in their locations. As a big opportunity, it may also result in unintentional gentrification. Indeed, metropolitan smart employees have substantially greater incomes than rural people, which could hasten the gentrification of rural areas. It is critical for rural dwellers to build long-term communities of people who choose to stay, live, and work in rural areas. Learning from European experience is desirable in making future plans. Travel agencies that offer package arrangements for visiting ‘the ten most attractive abandoned villages’, also called ‘ghost villages’ or ‘dust villages’ because there is no one in them, have also joined the renewal and popularization of abandoned villages in Italy [39]. The reconstruction initiative comes from the descendants of abandoned residents who organize to raise money for reconstruction, including from international donors, as is the case in the Calabria region, where the famous American University of Technology from Massachusetts (MIT) was involved in rebuilding an abandoned medieval village. Marchetti [40] writes that so-called ‘smart working villages’ are now flourishing in Italy, as local authorities grasp the potential of boosting high-speed internet and setting up equipped ‘labs’ for telecommuters.

The sixth hypothesis (H6) says that this ‘Italian model’ can be applied in Serbia, as well.

The last three hypotheses (H7, H8 and H9) assume the possibility of ecological, economic, and socio-demographic sustainability of rural areas of Serbia.

The fact that health is no longer just a demographic or individual-level concern, but rather a global pandemic, demonstrates its actual significance, and its impact contributes to the creation of a fourth pillar of global sustainability [41]. The COVID-19 pandemic is so severe, in terms of duration and intensity that it is impossible to combat it with absorptive capacities or a simple system adaptation. As a result, via adaptation and transformation, it should become an opportunity to advance and ‘bounce forward’ [42]. Negative consequences are substantially higher than rates of viral exposure, indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic’s larger effects are far-reaching in rural areas [18]. Moreno-Luna et al. [43] stated that the impact of the pandemic is still being evaluated. Åslund [44] argues that it is too early to judge economic outcomes.

3. Materials and Methods

A survey was conducted for the needs of research and obtaining relevant information from the population from rural areas of Serbia. The questionnaire was formed on the basis of a complex analysis of papers published so far in Serbia and abroad. When possible, questions from previously published studies were adopted. The questionnaire was also influenced by topics that appear in renowned domestic dailies. The open-ended questions within the semi-structured questionnaire helped us to take a more comprehensive and serious understanding of the attitudes of residents in rural areas of Serbia, in regard to the factual situation, consequences, and possible solutions. In addition, respondents spoke or wrote about their perception of facts affecting environmental, economic, socio-demographic, and cultural sustainability, in conditions initiated by COVID-19 pandemic.

In September 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Building on the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’, the new Agenda emphasizes a holistic approach to achieving sustainable development for all [45,46]. Some of the views offered were formed according to the sustainable development goals mentioned in the UN Agenda 2030.

The research was conducted from 25 June to 22 August 2021, electronically in Google Forms, as well as in the field. In other words, data for this study were collected via plural mode personal contact, phone, and internet survey of residents of the rural spaces in the Republic of Serbia. The internet survey was completed only once, and the survey could be completed whenever respondents wished. Rural communities also fall along a broad spectrum of economic profiles, ranging from deeply impoverished to some of the wealthiest enclaves in the country. Respondents’ consent was taken before the survey and they remained anonymous.

Efforts were made to ensure that respondents were from all parts of the mentioned regions were represented. It turned out to be the time when the lowest number of infected and dead was recorded (Figure 1). The authors believe that the respondents, due to this fact, could perceive the research issues more objectively. The survey was offered in Serbian. The sample was designed to be representative of the population, at a sampling error of $\pm 3.1\%$ at 95% confidence level.

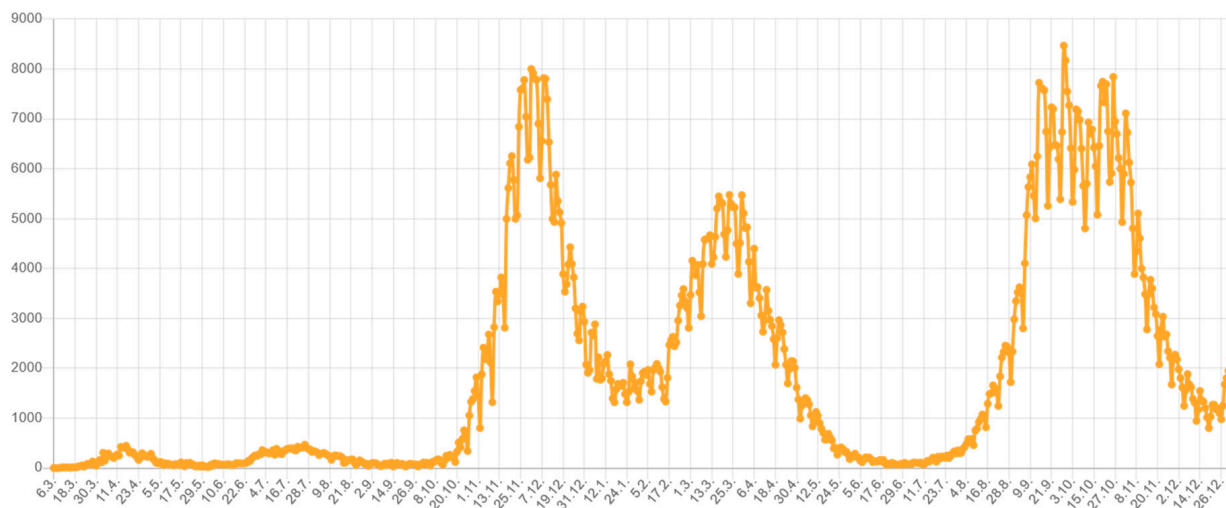


Figure 1. Number of positives by dates, Adapted from Ref. [47].

3.1. Sample

The Raosoft [48] calculator was used to check the sample size appropriateness [49]. As a result, a sample of 471 respondents was recommended for a population of 7,186,862 (the total population of the state), at a confidence level of 97.0 percent. The sample was judged representative because the inquiry covered 700 people, with 519 of them accurately filling out questionnaires (74.1%). According to Babbie [50], a response rate of 70% or more is a solid sign of measuring scale acceptability.

3.2. Variables

The sample was not stratified because respondents were anonymous. Answers revealed that the majority of respondents are women. The relative majority of respondents are aged 40–49. More than two thirds of respondents have graduated. Academic education gives a more complex view of the exploration (Table 1). More than three-fifths live in rural plain terrain. The mountainous areas of Serbia are less populated than the lowlands [4]. Data was collected in five Serbian regions: Vojvodina, Belgrade, Šumadija and West Serbia, South and East Serbia, and Kosovo and Metohija (Table 2).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

Variables	Total 519	Number	%
Gender	Male	210	40.5
	Female	309	59.5
Age	18–29	128	24.7
	30–39	99	19.1
	40–49	187	36.0
	50–59	61	11.7
	60+	44	8.5
Place of living	Hilly	191	36.8
	Plain	328	63.2

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variables	Total 519	Number	%
Region	Vojvodina	109	21.0
	Belgrade	105	20.2
	Šumadija and West Serbia (SWS)	114	22.0
	South and East Serbia (SES)	140	27.0
	Kosovo and Metohija	51	9.8
Settlements	Less than 500 inhabitants	56	10.8
	500–1000	81	15.6
	Village with more than 1500	120	23.1
	Big village	262	50.5
Education	Elementary school	8	1.5
	High school	151	29.1
	Faculty	360	69.4
Employment	Legal	342	65.9
	Illegal	28	5.4
	Unemployed	117	22.5
	Pensioner	32	6.2

Source: authors' findings.

Table 2. Population of Serbia, according Census 2011.

Region	Total Population Number	Surface (km ²)	Density (ihb/km ²)	Rural Population	Share in Total Population of the Region (%)
Vojvodina	1,931,809	21,614	89.4	112,679	5.83
Belgrade	1,659,440	3234	513.1	13,587	0.82
Šumadija and West Serbia	2,031,697	26,495	76.7	241,575	11.9
South and East Serbia	1,563,916	26,249	59.6	123,647	7.9
Kosovo and Metohija	Estimate about 26,000	10,910	No data	No data	No data
Serbia total	7,186,862	88,502	92.6	491,488	6.8

Source: [4,51,52].

3.3. Survey

The questionnaire had questions that were thematically divided into the following units: socio-demographic characteristics, experience with the COVID-19, current state, farmers and COVID-19 pandemic, consequences, evaluation, and possible solutions, as well as sections related to environmental, economic, and socio-demographic sustainability (Table 3). In the questions from the Q1 group, the respondents chose one of the offered socio-demographic categories. In question groups Q2 and Q4, they had three options (Yes, No, or I don't know). In the others, they were offered five opportunities. Respondents were asked to rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their overall life, as well as three parts of their lives: household finances, mental health, and physical health, on a scale of 1 (extremely negative) to 5 (extremely positive). Based on that, descriptive statistics were made and by expressed average value and standard deviation.

Paper compares results between male and female, ages, place of living, regions of Serbia (NUTS 2—according to the EUROSTAT, the basic regions for the application of regional policies), settlement size, level of education, and occupation (Table 1), in both a bivariate and multivariable context. A *t*-test was used to find significant differences in the variance at $p < 0.05$. The one-way ANOVA test was conducted to confirm the significant differences in the variance at $p < 0.01$; $F \geq 3.47$.

Respondents had the opportunity to comment, especially in the group of questions for possible solutions (Q7).

Table 3. Question groups.

Question Groups	Number of Questions
Q1—Socio-demographic characteristics	7
Q2—Experience with the COVID-19	4
Q3—Current state	21
Q4—Farmers and COVID-19 pandemic	4
Q5—Consequences	8
Q6—Evaluation	4
Q7—Possible solutions	3
Q8—Sustainability in general	2
Q9—Ecological sustainability	6
Q10—Economic sustainability	6
Q11—Socio-demographic sustainability	6

Source: authors' findings.

At the time of the study, almost half of the subjects had been vaccinated with both doses. Janackovic [53] testified about the organization of health services for the purpose of vaccinating residents in remote mountain villages. Half claimed they had not been infected with COVID-19. Nine-tenths thought they had been in contact with an infected person (Table 4).

Table 4. Experience with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Experience/Status	Answers	Total Number of Answers	Percent %
Vaccinated with both doses	Yes	245	47.2
	No	239	46.1
	I don't want to say	35	6.7
Infected	Yes	161	31.0
	No	263	50.7
	I don't know	95	18.3
To be in contact with infected	Yes	463	89.2
	No	20	3.9
	I don't know	36	6.9
Changes in life Vaccinated with both doses	Yes	240	46.2
	No	185	35.7
	I don't know	94	18.1

Source: authors' findings.

4. Results

Maps of the GIS platform for monitoring the epidemiological situation and spread of the COVID-19 virus in the territory of the Republic of Serbia [54], as well as maps of the distribution of respirators, indicate which areas are more endangered by the infection [55]. If they are compared with the territorial distribution of the population in Serbia [8], then it can be clearly concluded that the areas in which the population is denser are more vulnerable, i.e., the infection spreads faster. Similar conclusions can be found in other studies. Agnoletti et al. [56] confirm that Italians living in less energy-intensive landscapes are less exposed to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already claimed many lives and is now posing a serious threat to largely elderly persons who suffer from diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, or chronic respiratory syndrome [23]. The rural areas of Serbia are inhabited by an elderly population. The distribution of the old population at the level of settlements, from the end of 2011, based on the share of the elderly in the total population, shows that the oldest are the most numerous in the peripheral, hilly, and mountainous areas. These are areas outside the main communication flows, long affected by depopulation, which is why two decades ago, they reached the stages of the deepest and most profound demographic

ageing, left without demographic resources for revitalization [57]. Less energy-intensive provinces have an older population and, according to recent medical study, are more prone to the virus [58]. The following is an attempt to show what the rural areas of Serbia look like during the pandemic. The results indicate the current situation, speak about the consequences, and envisions possible solutions offered by the respondents.

4.1. Condition and Consequences

On the basis of the available literature, opinions were formed that tried to ascertain how noticeable some phenomena, important in geographical research for the sustainability of rural parts of Serbia, were during the COVID-19 pandemic. Items are presented in the order in which they are studied in geographical science (Table 5).

Table 5. Condition since the beginning of the pandemic.

From the Begging of Pandemic . . .	M	σ
There are more new babies	2.79	1.13
There are more deaths around me	3.46	1.26
People leave the countryside	2.81	1.21
People take refuge in rural areas	3.50	1.15
People lose their jobs	3.82	1.09
Social distancing jeopardized my income	2.96	1.28
Farmers have big losses	3.51	1.15
Farmers have trouble finding workers	3.52	1.12
Farmers find it difficult to sell their products	3.40	1.18
Changes in sales methods	3.75	1.11
Reduced need for service trades (hairdressing salons, tailors, car repair shops)	2.95	1.29
Entrepreneurs harmonize their initiatives with the needs of the market (they start making masks, visors, gloves, containers for storing disinfectants, and the like)	3.55	1.20
A lot is being built in the countryside	2.84	1.13
People have problems with the supply of basic foodstuffs	3.03	1.26
Growing demand for computers and similar electronic equipment	3.82	1.12
People rarely travel	3.71	1.25
Increased demand for rural tourist services	3.52	1.17
There are good people (neighbor, friend, relative) because he offered me some kind of help (for example, about supplies, physical help, financial help)	3.54	1.16
Difficult education of children and youth	4.10	1.16
Increased need for health workers	3.98	1.11
Sports activities are rarely practiced	3.45	1.22

Source: authors' findings.

Opinions related to the issues of natural and mechanical movement of the population were first presented. Respondents do not have a definite opinion on whether the pandemic resulted in higher birth rates in rural areas, or whether deaths have intensified. These attitudes are discussed in non-rural-focused literature [59]. Restrictions on movement and social contacts are impossible to control in remote, scattered rural settlements. Respondents stated that these measures were not consistently respected. Thus, the pandemic has not changed the way of life, especially in small mountain settlements. This benefits the quality of life in rural areas.

No clear opinion was received on the departure of people from the countryside, so socio-demographic groups with clearer views were sought. The respondents from the territory of Southern and Eastern Serbia stood out as the only ones who agreed ($M = 3.86$, $\sigma = 1.07$) that people leave the countryside (Table 6). It shows that the pandemic did not stop the permanent emigration from rural areas, mentioned by Zdravković [60] and Nikitović [61]. Respondents from Western Serbia were undecided, so to speak, on the verge of disagreement ($M = 2.51$), with great mutual disagreement ($\sigma = 1.26$) following the work of Willberg et al. [62], which, using mobile telephony, reveals the movement of the population towards rural areas. He emphasized the need to improve preparedness in crisis situations, which has recognized the growing importance of living in more places. Respondents agree that they have noticed that people are moving to rural areas. From the respondents, it was learned that these people are residents of cities that have grandparents,

holiday homes, and close relatives in rural areas. They are retirees or those who have the ability to work remotely.

Table 6. One-factor analysis of differences between the respondents, based on the Serbia region in which they live (F (5, 519) critic values, according to the Snedecor and Cochran table [63]; $p < 0.01$; $F \geq 3.47$).

Items	Regions	M	σ	F	p
People leave the countryside	Belgrade	2.90	1.11	22.87	0.0000
	East Serbia	3.86	1.07		
	Kosovo and Metohija	3.08	1.29		
	West Serbia	2.51	1.26		
	Vojvodina	3.00	1.21		
The economic sustainability of villages is in favor of organizing cultural events in rural areas	Belgrade	4.00	0.81	4.91	0.0007
	East Serbia	3.59	1.05		
	Kosovo and Metohija	3.63	1.15		
	West Serbia	3.63	1.17		
	Vojvodina	4.03	0.93		

Source: authors' findings.

The media spread the news, which was announced by the authorities, that from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic until the second half of April 2020, 400,000 citizens who temporarily or permanently lost their jobs abroad returned to Serbia [64,65]. In addition, Serbia provided them with safe health care. As sociologists say, existential fear also supports this [66]. The motivation for return is complex and related to the origin, personal circumstances, and opportunities that are 'opening' in Serbia, which did not exist when a number of people moved out 10 or 15 years ago. Startup culture, benefits for returnees, tax breaks, support for creative industries, and development of the IT sector in the previous decade, as well as the opening of the global market, have influenced the migration flows to change, according to our experts. With the establishment of the eGovernment portal administrative procedures, available online, have been accelerated and facilitated [67]. In the period from 2015 to 2019, Serbia had a net positive migration of highly educated returnees in all age groups [68].

Respondents noticed that people lost their jobs (Table 7), especially in activities that were officially recognized as the most vulnerable [69,70] during the pandemic. Although reduced need for service trades (hairdressing and beauty salons, tailors, car repair shops), bookmakers, gambling houses, and children's playrooms have been recognized in urban areas [71], respondents from rural areas do not have a clear opinion on this issue (Table 5). It should be borne in mind that most of these activities do not exist or occur sporadically in most rural areas. They agree that those with smaller savings are consequently more endangered.

Respondents showed great disagreements and a vague attitude on the item that social distancing jeopardized their income. Only the unemployed agreed that social distancing jeopardized their income. However, within this sociodemographic category, there are large disagreements ($\sigma = 1.50$) (Table 7). Some of them had been employed in tourism, catering, art, recreation, etc.

In the media, the headlines indicated that, due to the appearance of new factories for the production of the necessary supplies during the pandemic [72,73], new jobs are being created [74]. This appeared to be another positive factor, in favor of the sustainability of rural areas. Respondents agreed that entrepreneurs harmonized their initiatives with the needs of the market (they started production of masks, visors, gloves, containers for storing disinfectants, and the like) ($M = 3.55$), but large discrepancies were observed ($\sigma = 1.20$). (Table 5). That is why the one-factor analysis of ANOVA showed that the unemployed almost completely did not agree that with the appearance of new plants for the production of funds necessary during the pandemic, new jobs will be created (Table 7). This result can also be interpreted as the unemployed being insufficiently informed.

Table 7. One-factor analysis of differences between the respondents based on their occupation (F (4, 519) critic values, according to Snedecor and Cochran table [63]; $p < 0.01$; $F \geq 3.47$).

Items	States	M	σ	F	p
Social distancing jeopardized my income	Legal	2.86	1.27	4.19	0.0060
	Illegal	3.09	1.21		
	Pensioner	3.03	1.15		
	Unemployed	3.64	1.50		
With the appearance of new factories for the production of the necessary funds during the pandemic, new jobs are being created	Legal	2.87	1.10	173.36	0.0000
	Illegal	2.93	1.10		
	Pensioner	3.28	1.25		
	Unemployed	2.57	1.10		
I have the impression that COVID-19 will never disappear	Legal	3.48	1.22	4.29	0.0053
	Illegal	3.91	1.02		
	Pensioner	3.63	1.04		
	Unemployed	3.57	1.26		
Influence evaluation of the COVID-19 pandemic: budget (home)	Legal	2.85	1.09	3.93	0.0086
	Illegal	2.66	1.20		
	Pensioner	2.38	0.98		
	Unemployed	2.39	1.40		

Source: authors' findings.

Respondents agreed with some of the troubles in rural areas that were mentioned in the literature. Farmers faced heavy losses. Respondents from smaller rural areas agreed that they had problems earning a wage, while a statistically significant difference arose due to those from large villages (more than 1500 inhabitants), who were undecided ($M = 3.38$) (Table 8). This indicates that their problems in finding labor and selling agricultural products are less frequent. It follows that finding work in larger rural settlements is easier, and sustainability is more certain. There are divided opinions on the difficulty of selling agricultural products. Respondents from settlements with less than 1500 inhabitants stated that they have difficulties selling their products, while those from larger settlements are undecided or have significant disagreement ($M = 3.24$, $\sigma = 1.19$). This indicates that not everyone has such problems (Table 8). Respondents agreed that changes in sales methods are needed. Social networks, especially in periods of quarantine, restriction of movement, and difficult communication, have proven [75,76] the usefulness of their existence.

Table 8. One-factor analysis of differences between the respondents, based on the settlement size in which they live (F (4, 519) critic values, according to Snedecor and Cochran table [63]; $p < 0.01$; $F \geq 3.47$).

Items	States	M	σ	F	p
Influence evaluation of the COVID-19 pandemic: total life	Less than 500	2.59	1.14	3.71	0.0115
	500–1000	3.01	1.23		
	1000–1500	2.49	1.01		
	More than 1500	2.70	1.12		
Farmers have trouble finding workers	Less than 500	3.88	1.01	3.77	0.0107
	500–1000	3.67	1.16		
	1000–1500	3.54	1.15		
	More than 1500	3.38	1.09		
Farmers find it difficult to sell their products	Less than 500	3.84	1.19	4.83	0.0025
	500–1000	3.51	1.22		
	1000–1500	3.84	1.07		
	More than 1500	3.24	1.19		
I have the impression that COVID-19 will never disappear	Less than 500	3.91	1.08	4.00	0.0078
	500–1000	3.65	1.26		
	1000–1500	3.74	1.07		
	More than 1500	3.43	1.21		

Source: authors' findings.

More than 70% of respondents were not informed about the trends in the value of subsidies for farmers (Table 9). This question speaks more about the fact that subsidies are not used. Since the beginning of the pandemic, farmers engaged in vegetables and fruit growing have not received state support, as evidenced by the work of Gajdobranski et al. [77]. Three-fifths of respondents confirmed that the pandemic forced farmers to search for markets online. Four-fifths confirmed that older farmers use the Internet less often. These facts confirm the hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic brought evident changes in various segments of agricultural activity (H2). From these findings, it can be concluded that the hopes for the sustainability of the village are in intensifying the use of state aid, modernizing business using the Internet, but also that increased electronic literacy of the elderly, during the colder part of the year, would help.

Table 9. Farmers and COVID-19 pandemic.

Questions	Answers	Respondents	%
Subsidies for farmers have not increased?	Yes	80	15.4
	No	67	12.9
	I don't know	372	71.7
Has the pandemic forced farmers to search the market online?	Yes	311	59.9
	No	28	5.4
	I don't know	180	34.7
Do the older farmers use the internet less?	Yes	425	81.9
	No	20	3.8
	I don't know	74	14.3
I notice that public figures are propagating life in the countryside.	Yes	136	26.2
	No	125	24.1
	I don't know	258	49.7

Source: authors' findings.

Miassi et al. [78] wrote on revenue decline in households worldwide. This research found that retirees and the unemployed rated the impact of the pandemic on the household budget or the state of finances worse, compared to the employed, whether working legally or illegally (Table 7). The pandemic negatively affected the household budget of respondents who completed only primary school. They also showed a high degree of mutual agreement. Given their level of education, these respondents are employed in lower paid jobs or are among the older respondents (Table 10).

Respondents did not have a clear view of whether a lot is being built in the countryside, with the value of the standard deviation showing their mutual disagreement ($\sigma = 1.13$), which indicates that construction works exist and that, according to the respondents' comments, they are more obvious in larger settlements, closer to Belgrade. However, they could not claim that the construction work was initiated by the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Živić [79] notes to what extent in the remote villages of Eastern Serbia, among the oldest population, restricting movement has made life difficult. Following this story, the attitude was formed that people have problems with the supply of basic foodstuffs. Respondents did not have a definite answer and showed great disagreement ($\sigma = 1.26$). This result was reached because the settlements, from which the respondents came, are of different sizes and distances from the points where they are supplied. So, in reality, a number did not experience any difficulties.

Table 10. One-factor analysis of differences between the respondents based on their education (F (3, 519) critic values, according to Snedecor and Cochran table [63]; $p < 0.01$; $F \geq 3.47$).

Items	States	M	σ	F	p
Influence evaluation of the COVID-19 pandemic: budget (home)	Elementary school	1.88	0.99	4.17	0.0160
	High school	2.66	1.15		
	Faculty	2.81	1.12		
People rarely travel	Elementary school	3.63	1.19	6.62	0.0014
	High school	3.44	1.31		
	Faculty	3.83	1.21		
Unpredictability of tourist movements	Elementary school	3.38	0.92	7.67	0.0005
	High school	3.54	1.09		
	Faculty	3.88	0.99		
The state can affect the economic sustainability of villages.	Elementary school	4.38	0.74	9.22	0.0001
	High school	3.86	1.15		
	Faculty	4.20	0.85		
Applying for international projects would provide financial support for the economic sustainability of the village	Elementary school	3.88	0.64	4.40	0.0128
	High school	3.60	1.14		
	Faculty	3.87	1.02		
Educating the local population to start entrepreneurial initiatives can influence the economic sustainability of the village	Elementary school	4.00	0.53	11.50	0.0000
	High school	3.59	1.16		
	Faculty	3.99	0.90		
By organizing cultural events in rural areas, the economic sustainability of the village can be influenced	Elementary school	4.13	0.64	5.28	0.0054
	High school	3.58	1.13		
	Faculty	3.85	0.99		
The development of (rural, but also other forms) tourism can affect the economic sustainability of the village	Elementary school	3.88	0.64	7.53	0.0006
	High school	3.78	1.11		
	Faculty	4.09	0.83		

Source: authors' findings.

A characteristic of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the switch from face-to-face to digital connections for schooling, higher education, business meetings, health consultations, shopping, and cultural events [19]. In order to limit the spread of the pandemic, the medical profession of Serbia advised social distancing. Due to this, school and remote work, as well as other activities, were organized on several occasions. Respondents agreed that the education of children and youth is difficult (Table 5). They believe that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are yet to be felt ($M = 4.17$, $\sigma = 1.06$). Respondents agreed that there is a growing demand for computers and similar electronic equipment. As a consequence, an increase in the price of technical equipment (computers, tablets, TVs, etc.) was observed. Respondents in rural areas agreed ($M = 3.73$, $\sigma = 1.08$) (Table 11) distance learning is a challenge for children, but also for parents who do not use computer skills in everyday life. In addition, no one raised the question of whether parents have the means to purchase and maintain computers. According to Vesić [80], schools in Belgrade procured tablets for students from the first to the fourth grade. Internet access is also provided for them [81]. This was arranged for the digitalization of teaching and as an aid to distance learning. Maybe the purchase was more necessary for children living in remote parts of Serbia? The rising wealth disparity has also exacerbated a social divide, based on class, which has resulted in unequal educational outcomes [82]. The utilization of online learning is a new reality for the education system that COVID-19 has developed, but only the wealthy have access to a solid internet connection and technology that allows for this form of study. Additionally, in Serbia, as Stanković [83] wrote, 10–12% of children could not access online classes because they do not have the opportunity to access the Internet. There are also students who have the Internet, but their parents cannot afford laptops or computers. Thus, the pandemic imposed new ways of education that would contribute to

the improvement of life in the countryside, but also creates a problem for those to whom they are inaccessible for financial reasons.

Table 11. Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Following Consequences Are Evident	M	σ
With the appearance of new factories for the production of the necessary funds during the pandemic, new jobs are being created	2.90	1.11
I notice an increase in the price of technical equipment (computers, tablets, TVs, etc.)	3.73	1.08
Unpredictability of tourist movements	3.77	1.03
Children will feel the consequences of distance learning	4.17	1.06
More and more of those who fell ill because of COVID, and not from COVID	3.83	1.09
By following the media more often, I find out more bad news that negatively affects my mood	3.83	1.11
I have the impression that COVID-19 pandemic will never disappear	3.59	1.18
Those with smaller savings are more endangered	3.91	1.07

Source: authors' findings.

Due to the greater dispersion of workplaces, consumer and business services, and the importance of visitor economies to many rural regions, more severe limitations on personal travel for non-essential activities may have a greater impact on rural areas [84]. Respondents confirmed that people rarely travel (Table 5). Respondents with a high school diploma do not agree with each other and do not have a clear vision of whether the pandemic has reduced travel. Working from home is a privilege that highly educated people could have during a pandemic [85,86], so most respondents with this level of education continued to work. Rural areas' structural characteristics, such as their widely scattered population base and long-standing practice of home-based labor [87], may serve as a source of resilience during this crisis.

Respondents agreed with the view that tourist movements have become unpredictable (Table 11). Respondents with the lowest level of education did not know how to comment on this issue, while more educated respondents agreed (Table 10). It is not possible to predict in which direction the pandemic will move, and the movements of tourists also depend on it. Will mass vaccination allow free movement? Will mobility with any vaccine be allowed? Will a COVID pass be introduced that is valid both in this country and abroad? What will be the policy in the favorite destinations chosen by travelers from Serbia? Where will tourists go? Will all potential obstacles motivate them to decide to travel within Serbia? Which destinations will be the most attractive? Maksimović [88] talks about the influence of COVID-19 on the increase in the price of accommodation in rural Serbia, as well as the increased interest in rural tourism. Respondents also confirmed that they noticed an increased demand for rural tourist services.

Respondents agreed that the need for health workers increased (Table 5). According to their comments, it can be concluded that this is an inherited condition (and not caused by a pandemic). Respondents supported the item ($M = 3.83$, $\sigma = 1.09$) that there were more people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than by the COVID-19 virus. The pandemic disrupted the work of the health system, as well as the specialist health care services. In that way, it negatively influenced the detection and treatment of all other diseases.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are also felt on a psychological level. Respondents agreed with the following statement 'By following the media more often, I find out more bad news that negatively affects my mood'. In addition, with less mutual agreement, they supported the position 'I have the impression that COVID-19 pandemic will never disappear' (Table 11). In settlements of less than 1500, respondents agree that they have the impression that the COVID-19 pandemic will not disappear, while those from the largest settlements are undecided. This shows that they are more optimistic and believe that the negative effects of the pandemic will be reduced by vaccination, finding adequate drugs, or people taking care of each other. By employment category, all

but employed respondents have the impression that the COVID-19 pandemic will never disappear (Table 7).

The news portal 021 [89] cites unique examples of COVID crime, based on the announcements of the judicial authorities. The Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime prosecuted a case of falsifying results of PCR tests and selling them for travel abroad, as well as the selling of false results of COVID-19 tests and stickers as confirmation of vaccination with the Pfizer vaccine. The Special Prosecutor's Office for the Fight against High-Tech Crime states that there were cases of registration of fake domains for the purpose of falsifying negative PCR test certificates. In addition, a volunteer at the vaccination point, located at the Belgrade Fair, admitted that he had entered several false certificates of vaccination and revaccination. The World Health Organization also warned about fake vaccines, and EUROPOL warned about similar phenomena.

The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which are discussed in the world literature and on the basis of which the research of the situation and consequences was made, were noticed and present in the rural areas of Serbia. This confirms the first hypothesis (H1).

4.2. Possible Solutions

Not many items were offered in the research, but space was left for the respondents, more precisely the inhabitants of rural settlements, to write or say what they saw as possible solutions to the new problems brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of 519 respondents, 117 proposed solutions. The most interesting ones are listed after the comments on the offered solutions.

In the Balkans, there is a saying 'Some war, some brother' [90], which refers to the fact that there are people who profit in different ways in times of natural disasters, wars, and the like. Respondents recognized this phenomenon in their living environment (increase in the price of electronic equipment, loss of job, problem in business and movement, reduction of the household budget due to expenses caused by the pandemic, etc.), and that is negative. It is positive that they condemn this to the extent that they agree that we should work on raising awareness that it is not moral to get rich in times of crisis (Table 12). This item indirectly 'supports' the sustainability of rural areas in Serbia.

Table 12. Possible solutions.

Possible Solutions and Overcoming the Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic	M	σ
Raising awareness not to make money on 'someone else's trouble'	3.87	1.11
Designing the functioning of the remote health system	3.25	1.28
Revising curricula in education	3.75	1.12

Source: authors' findings.

Respondents agreed that there are good people (neighbor, friend, relative) because they offered some kind of help (for example, supplies, physical help, and financial help). This is one of the positive things that appeared in response to the negative effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Designing the functioning of the remote health system did not find a clear position of the respondents (Table 12). Probably because it is difficult for them to imagine how it would work, although it exists, in practice, at other geographical coordinates [91]. Those who agreed commented that it was better to have something rather than nothing. Psychological and verbal support, in the form of good and professional advice, is also valuable. A female respondent, in the age category 30–39, wrote that 'overcoming the problems caused by the pandemic, and thus the lack of medical staff and adequate health care, is seen in the adoption of the law on compulsory vaccination.' Several respondents mentioned 'working on preventative healthcare' and 'promoting healthy living habits'. Younger respondents wrote that they would 'emulate the countries that had the least consequences since the outbreak of the pandemic.'

Respondents agreed with the third position offered and the idea that the curricula in education should be adjusted (Table 12). Since the beginning of the pandemic, schools in Serbia have functioned according to different models. Research will show their effectiveness, but the standards of assessment have not changed and, from the conversations with the respondents, it was heard that the conditions in which learning takes place should be taken into account in the educational system, as well, primarily from the psychological aspect of stress, fear, uncertainty, and unpredictability. The respondent from the youngest age group suggested that it is necessary to 'provide equal conditions for monitoring classes'. Respondents emphasized that work should also be done on 'encouraging humanitarian activities from the youngest generations'. The respondent from the oldest age category offered the opinion that 'better education of the population can be achieved through public media'.

Respondents suggested solutions that did not thematically relate to the items offered. Most respondents pointed out the need for better local infrastructure, as in Serbia, according to Ekapija [92], more attention is currently being paid to the main roads.

To citizens exhausted by work and city life, rural areas offer a 'better quality of life', in nature, learning, or engaging in the cultivation of crops and production. Life in the countryside implies great physical activity and lack of time to follow media information. A large number of respondents expressed negative attitudes towards news media. One male respondent, in the 40–49 age group, summarized several other similar responses, saying, 'The media exaggerates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then it affects some areas, which it doesn't really have to.' A female respondent, from the youngest category, noted that it is necessary to 'place more positive content through public media', but also that well-known, so-called folk festivities originated from the villages of Serbia [93]. A respondent from the oldest category commented that her solution could resemble the Latin proverb 'songs and games, because a person is happier the less they know'.

A male respondent, aged 40–49, suggests the introduction of significant 'financial assistance to farmers and entrepreneurs'. A respondent from the younger age category writes that 'the import of all agricultural products that can be produced on the territory of Serbia should be banned.' A man from the youngest age category said that it was very important that there was a 'secured market and acceptable prices of agricultural products by which people from the countryside could provide themselves with an adequate income and standard of living.'

According to Obradović [94], the key to Serbia's recovery, after the COVID-19 pandemic, is to boost productivity and digitize. According to one respondent, 'Serbia must shorten and facilitate administrative procedures because of which one goes from the village to the city.' A respondent from the youngest age category thinks that 'young people who emigrated from rural areas would be attracted to return by creative and profitable jobs, which could also bring those young people who were born in cities'.

A respondent, aged 40–49, suggests that 'different levels of taxes (thinking that the amount of taxes should increase with the proximity of the city) would immediately regulate the distribution of the population in small Serbia.' A male respondent, of the same age, believes that the only solution is 'decentralization of different institutions, which would contribute to more balanced regional development.'

There were respondents who were of the opinion that we should work on 'designing, improving, organizing and conducting education of coexistence with pandemics like this COVID-19'. It is in line with such attitudes that rural conditions have more favorable conditions and less aggravating circumstances for such training.

4.3. Pandemic Impact Assessment

Respondents from rural areas of Serbia were asked to assess the impact of the pandemic on their mental and physical health, budget, and overall life. During the self-evaluation, they did not show mutual agreement on any of the categories proposed. Self-assessment showed that the values tend to be more negative (less than 3). Of all the propositions, physical health was rated the best, and the state of the household budget was the weakest

(Table 13). As physical and mental health improves staying in nature [95], so these facts support the placement of life in rural areas that costs less [96].

Table 13. Influence evaluation of the COVID-19 pandemic (from 1 to 5).

Influence Evaluation of the COVID-19 Pandemic	M	σ
Mental health	2.77	1.22
Physical health	2.91	1.22
Budget (home)	2.75	1.14
Total life	2.69	1.12

Source: authors' findings.

Respondents from larger rural settlements (1000–1500 inhabitants) expressed the lowest assessment ($M = 2.49$) of the impact of the presence of COVID-19 pandemic on the total life. The highest score (3.01) was obtained for respondents who live in what Mitrović [4] calls middle villages, with 500–1000 inhabitants (Table 8). They are most evenly distributed throughout Serbia, but the majority of them are in the region of Šumadija and Western Serbia. This symbolic optimism can be called a positive hint of sustainability.

Numerous answers were received to the open question of what the pandemic has changed in the lives of rural respondents. Among them, many mourn the dead, particularly the fact that they could not be near them when they were most needed. Some stated that, after they had recovered from the virus, 'the consequences caused by the virus on the vital organs began to be felt.' In some, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the fear of death, infection, helplessness, and loss of existence. Some stated that it disrupted their condition and zest for life. It caused anger, caution, irritability, worry, uncertainty, and helplessness. Some respondents stated that they began to feel a psychological burden, due to material insecurity. The curfew also had a negative effect on the psyche of the respondents. A lot of the answers contain the following words 'everything has become more expensive' or 'people have lost their jobs, their incomes, their basic living conditions'. The pandemic has changed the organization of work, reduced contacts to a minimum, made people cautious, and made them think about actions that belong, but also do not belong to the daily routine.

There was an answer that 'life in a rural area is a constant struggle for a better life in which the one who works wins. There is salvation in work, because it focuses thoughts on the task at hand, and not on other external topics.' Respondents who state that their perspective on life has changed, in the sense that they have begun to respect other people's decisions, are not uncommon. One respondent wrote 'I wear a mask when I go shopping and I realize how happy I am that life in nature allows me not to have to do it all the time.' People began to recognize priorities, but also things they had not noticed before. One of the answers was 'I have to take care of my own health, but I think it's easier for me insofar as I drink spring water and eat from my garden and barn.' A positive aspect is that it 'awakened' the impulse to care for others and increased the sense of responsibility for one's own and other people's health. Some have stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has also changed the way of life. Enhanced hand hygiene has emerged as one of the few positive life achievements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Others again stated that they changed their attitude towards time. Some of the respondents stated that they liked the imposed calmness and reduced pace of life. Some used it to dedicate themselves to things they hadn't had time for before. The answers of these respondents support the hypothesis (H3) that the chance of sustainability of the village of Serbia is that, due to its characteristics, it makes life easier in a pandemic. Also, it is noted that there are some differences between the answers according to the age groups (Table 14). It is especially noted in younger population answers regarding organizing some novel events, such as cultural events. That can be a good starting point after pandemic.

Table 14. One-factor analysis of differences between the respondents based on their age group (F (5, 519) critic values, according to Snedecor and Cochran table [63]; $p < 0.01$; $F \geq 3.47$).

Items	States	M	σ	F	<i>p</i>
Influence evaluation of the COVID-19 pandemic: mental health	18–29	2.60	1.28	276.63	0.0000
	30–39	2.83	1.16		
	40–49	2.92	1.24		
	50–59	2.74	1.12		
	60+	2.52	1.17		
By organizing cultural events in rural areas, the economic sustainability of the village can be influenced	18–29	3.91	0.91	5.72	0.0002
	30–39	4.09	0.86		
	40–49	3.70	1.02		
	50–59	3.56	1.18		
	60+	3.36	1.33		

Source: authors' findings.

5. Discussion on Sustainability

There are big differences between the villages of Serbia. Villages that are closer to the city centers, in the valleys of large rivers or are located on busy roads are urbanized, large in population, economically diverse, and developed. There are mountain villages that have a small population, which is usually very old and abandoned. They have bad, or even no, roads. The population rarely leaves them, outsiders rarely enter them, and it can be said that they are isolated. In general, they have problems with food and medical supplies, health care, and often communication with the rest of the world. Djukić Pejić [97] points out that in the remote villages of Serbia, of which there are dozens, the old helpless population has a greater fear of hunger, lack of medicines, and other physical assistance, that is, lack of help from volunteers, geronto-housewives, and associations, than viruses. Many projects for delivering food directly from growers to customers' homes are taking undertaken across rural Europe [98]. The initial goal has frequently been to keep active production going in order to respond to new problems. Residents, according to De Luca [17], are less exposed to risk by receiving delivery at their door. This is both a means of ensuring the health of disadvantaged residents as well as a means of bolstering local production and entrepreneurs. For the elderly and vulnerable, this could be a lifeline. The majority of firms have made their standard products available to order straight from their websites or by phone. In some locations, projects have sprung from local farmer networks with the use of social media. The most common definition of sustainability is meeting current demands without jeopardizing future generations' ability to satisfy their own needs [41,99]. Three-quarters of respondents think that only the state can ensure the sustainability of villages. One in ten hopes for the help of the rich or self-organization of the local population. One respondent mentioned compatriots from the country and abroad (Figure 2). The absolute majority of respondents agreed that the sustainability of Serbian villages can be helped by more financial investments. Slightly more than a quarter thinks that the salvation lies in the more intensive engagement of the local community. However, there are also those who believe that new entertainment content can positively affect the sustainability of Serbian villages (Figure 3). The viability of rural settlements in Serbia is possible by harmonizing ecological, economic, and socio-demographic sustainability. That is why special attention is paid to each of them. Respondents added that anything that 'goes' in favor of sustainability in a pandemic can only be used when it is 'eradicated' or at least 'put under control.'

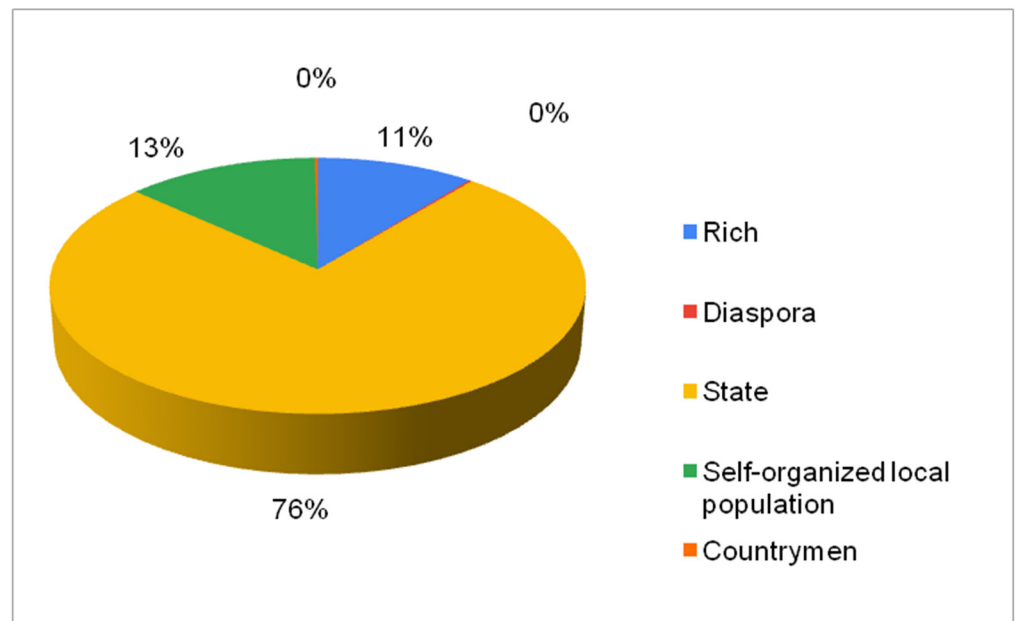


Figure 2. Who can ensure the sustainability of the village? Authors' findings.

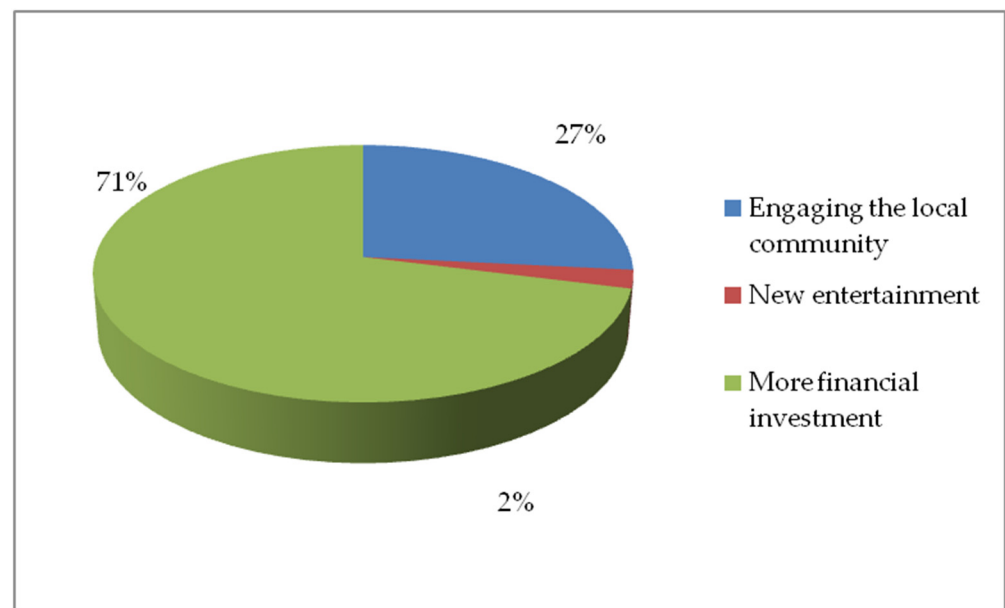


Figure 3. What does it take for a village to be sustainable? Authors' findings.

5.1. Environmental Sustainability

The majority of respondents (94.2%) stated that nature is more attractive to them in rural areas than people, and this fact 'supports' the attractiveness of rural areas. Respondents were undecided on most of the items related to environmental sustainability. In rural areas of Serbia, soil [100], water [101], and air [102] are polluted. This undermines their environmental sustainability. The pandemic has reduced sources of pollution in some areas [103], but in some it has not. They often stated that they were aware of the inadequate attitude towards the locations where waste is most often dumped spontaneously. Respondents are not even sure that the ecological sustainability of Serbian villages would be improved by educating the local population. They also showed great disagreement ($\sigma = 1.22$) regarding the fact that working from home reduced the pollution that would have occurred by transporting workers to work, if there had not been an emergency situation

and quarantine. Respondents did not have a clear attitude ($M = 3.03$) even to the opinion formed on the basis of similar research, that closing production facilities due to restrictions of movement has reduced pollution. For this opinion, the t-test showed statistically significant differences, which can be explained by the fact that production facilities are less common in mountainous areas (Table 15), as they are usually distanced from traffic communications; it is clear why respondents from these areas could not comment on this.

Table 15. Differences concerning the respondents on the basis of gender and relief (M —mean value, σ —standard deviation, t —value, p —importance level ($p < 0.01$)).

Item	Gender	M	σ	t	p
Since the beginning of the pandemic, construction has become more frequent.	Male	2.70	1.10	2.638	0.009
	Female	2.94	1.14		
Item	Place of Living	M	σ	t	p
The closure of production facilities, due to restrictions on movement during the pandemic, reduced pollution.	Mountain	3.17	1.15	2.628	0.009
	Plain	2.95	1.19		

Source: authors' findings.

Barbier and Burgess [104] said that it is critical that developing countries find innovative policy mechanisms to achieve sustainability and development aims in a cost-effective manner. They identify three policies that meet these criteria. According to them, Serbia should fund clean energy investments and dissemination of renewable energy in rural areas. The research showed that the respondents did not notice the appearance of such energy (Table 16). That it appears sporadically in Serbia can be concluded from the media [105–107] or literature [108]. It is important to emphasize that Serbia is turning to such energy sources. If events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, kept those who intended to go and bring others temporarily on vacation or permanently as a place of more relaxed and safer living, then 'green' energy would be the only one in the function of ecological sustainability of the space.

Table 16. Respondents' attitudes regarding environmental sustainability.

The Impact of a Pandemic on Environmental Sustainability	M	σ
By favoring organic agriculture	3.41	1.12
By raising environmental awareness through the media	3.27	1.24
By raising awareness about the need for adequate hygiene	3.57	1.13
By educating the local population	3.45	1.15
'Work from home' has reduced the pollution that would result from transport	3.29	1.22
Closing production facilities due to movement restrictions has reduced pollution	3.03	1.18

Source: authors' findings.

A new world order will almost certainly reestablish reliance on locally produced goods [109], which might significantly bolster poor country efforts to restore and grow domestic economic systems. As part of the reboot stimulus packages, this will provide opportunity to adopt policies that promote self-sufficient and sustainable local natural resource economies [110]. According to the conducted research, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a sufficient reason to completely switch to organic agriculture. Organic products are more expensive, and as Sudarević and Radojević [111] say 'joint efforts of the community as a whole should be continuously directed towards consumers' education on ecological benefits that consumption of organic food has as well'. Respondents are unsure that environmental awareness can be raised through the media, although at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Casero-Ripollés [112], the media is more closely monitored than before.

Respondents often emphasized the need to raise awareness of the qualities that life in nature provides. In support of environmental sustainability, respondents only agreed that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness of the need to maintain

adequate hygiene, as confirmed in their work by Miassi et al. [78]. Based on the obtained results, it cannot be said that the respondents think about and work on environmental sustainability, which is contrary to the assumed hypothesis (H7).

5.2. Economic Sustainability

The questionnaire offered opinions on factors mentioned in similar international research, which can positively affect the economic sustainability of rural areas. The only position for which the respondents did not have a definite attitude is that the diaspora can have a positive influence on it, although the research by Lukić et al. [113] recognized it as an option that can significantly contribute to the economic sustainability of rural areas of Serbia in various ways.

Respondents generally, but also significantly, agreed with each other that the state has an important influence on the economic sustainability of villages. Liu et al. [114] present the idea that different state institutions should collaborate to introduce preferential policies and encourage farmers to innovate and start to research their own businesses to drive their motivations. Respondents agree that educating the local population to start entrepreneurial initiatives would mean economic sustainability of the village (Table 17). Those with the least education agreed with this view the most (Table 10). This answer of the respondents indicates that they wanted to go to school, but that for various reasons they did not do so. Čikić [115] writes about the lack of education among the agricultural population, and that it is especially noticeable among rural women and that significant funds could be provided by applying to international projects. A one-factor analysis of ANOVA indicated that subjects with completed secondary education showed the highest degrees of disagreement (Table 10).

Table 17. Respondents' attitudes, regarding economic sustainability.

Who and How Can Influence the Economic Sustainability of Villages?	M	σ
State	4.11	0.96
Diaspora	3.16	1.14
By applying to international projects to provide financial support	3.79	1.06
By educating the local population to start entrepreneurial initiatives	3.87	0.99
By organizing cultural events in rural areas	3.78	1.03
Development of (rural, but also other forms) tourism	4.00	0.86

Source: authors' findings.

A pandemic often imposes restrictions on mass gatherings. This implies a chance to relocate the organization of cultural events to rural areas, with which the respondents agreed. One-factor analysis highlighted statistically significant differences among respondents from Eastern Serbia. They barely agreed that this could affect economic viability. Respondents from the north of Serbia, from the Region of Vojvodina and the Belgrade region agree more and their answers reached a mutual agreement ($\sigma \leq 1$) (Table 6). Statistically significant differences in the organization of cultural content in rural areas were singled out in the older population (60+). Compared to the others, it has a very high level of mutual disagreement, and at the same time there is no specific attitude. Others agree, which is in line with contemporary perceptions, with the example of organizing rural festivals [116]. Respondents under the age of 40 also showed an enviable agreement with each other (Table 14), which is perhaps the most important because they are the ones who are the future of rural areas. Respondents with the least education mutually agree that the organization of cultural events in rural areas would contribute to the economic sustainability of the village (Table 10), which speaks to their need for soul food, because art feeds the soul [117]; again, all this is in favor of the development of cultural, rural, but also other forms of tourism. According to Polukhina et al. [118], the crisis may encourage the development of domestic tourism and increase the quality of tourist services in rural areas. Rural tourism has the potential to help rural areas avoid depopulation, preserve and grow rural villages, and so strengthen territorial integrity. One-factor analysis showed

great mutual agreement on this topic among both the most educated and the most uneducated respondents (Table 10). Tourism has long been seen as a path to the sustainability of underdeveloped parts of Serbia [119]. Vukić and Kuzmanović [120] dealt with the issue of rural tourism branding. They suggested that for the Serbian village to become a brand, it must cause a sense of credibility of its own quality.

So, as the respondents showed agreement on most of the offered opinions, it can be said that all of them can positively affect the economic sustainability of the villages of Serbia, which is in favor of the preliminary hypothesis (H8).

5.3. Sociodemographic Sustainability

At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents agreed ($M \leq 3.50$) and showed great mutual agreement ($\sigma \leq 1$) with most of the views regarding the sociodemographic sustainability of the village. Thus, it can be said that hypothesis (H9), which refers to the attitudes of the respondents regarding the proposals that can positively affect the socio-economic sustainability of rural settlements in Serbia, was, thus, confirmed. According to the respondents, socio-demographic sustainability requires a better state strategy, greater material incentives, and education of the local population (Table 18). The highest value of mutual agreement was achieved on the item that it is necessary to provide basic needs or better living conditions (roads, water supply, sewerage, education, health care, etc.). Research by El Hagggar and Samaha [121] also points out that equitable, varied, connected, and democratic communities are regarded socially viable and give a high quality of life. Sinadonović [122] states that it is estimated that about 200,000 houses in the villages of Serbia are abandoned. Of 4700 villages in Serbia, almost a quarter is in the disappearance phase. They have less than 50 inhabitants each and these are on average more than 70 years old. Many do not have clinics, schools, or even shops. In Italy, according to Chuah [123], abandoned settlements are viewed as future settlement sites when cities can no longer accommodate the population. Bizzarri and Micera [124] have been demonstrated that, despite the home world's economic and social challenges, the pandemic has provided a significant chance for long-term rebuilding in smaller Italian villages. Young people have an advantage, even more if they have children, and for a start they are given an incentive in cash of several thousand Euros, tax relief, free transportation by school bus for children and more. These ideas are also recognized in the moves of the Serbian government. Djukić Pejić [125] says that the Ministry of Village Care has announced a competition for the purchase of rural houses with a garden for married couples up to 45 years of age. How fruitful can such a measure be in the time of the Corona?

Table 18. Respondents' attitudes, regarding sociodemographic sustainability.

How Can the Socio-Demographic Sustainability of Villages Be Influenced?	M	Σ
Better demographic strategy by the state.	4.02	1.01
Greater incentive material resources	4.12	0.95
Aggressive marketing in favor of forming and expanding families	3.28	1.23
Providing basic needs or better living conditions (roads, water supply, sewerage, education, health care, etc.)	4.29	0.93
By educating the local population	4.07	0.99
By designing new cultural content	3.80	1.08

Source: authors' findings.

They live in Internet-ready homes that will enable telecommuting as high-paid professionals, and in this situation, the majority will earn solid incomes while having essentials delivered to their front doors [82]. These are free people who are unconcerned about where they live and can afford to live in the middle of nowhere. Although the Internet has become the primary means of obtaining critical supplies and receiving important services [126,127], Moreno-Luna et al. [43] point out that not everyone has access to or the ability to use technology.

A survey in Serbia showed that 30% of respondents indicated that they have excellent or very good Internet. A relative majority indicated that they rated their internet connection as good. The smallest shares of respondents have a poor or satisfactory internet connection (Figure 4). So, the internet connection is good in most rural settlements, but it can always be better. According to Ristanovic [128], optical internet is spreading in Serbia. Considering that the presence of a good internet connection in the rural areas of Serbia has been confirmed, that rural areas need inhabitants and that they promise and provide privacy and peace, the hypothesis of the so-called the Italian model can also be applied in rural areas of Serbia (H6). Therefore, in the future spatial plans of municipalities, the formation of ‘smart working villages’ should be considered.

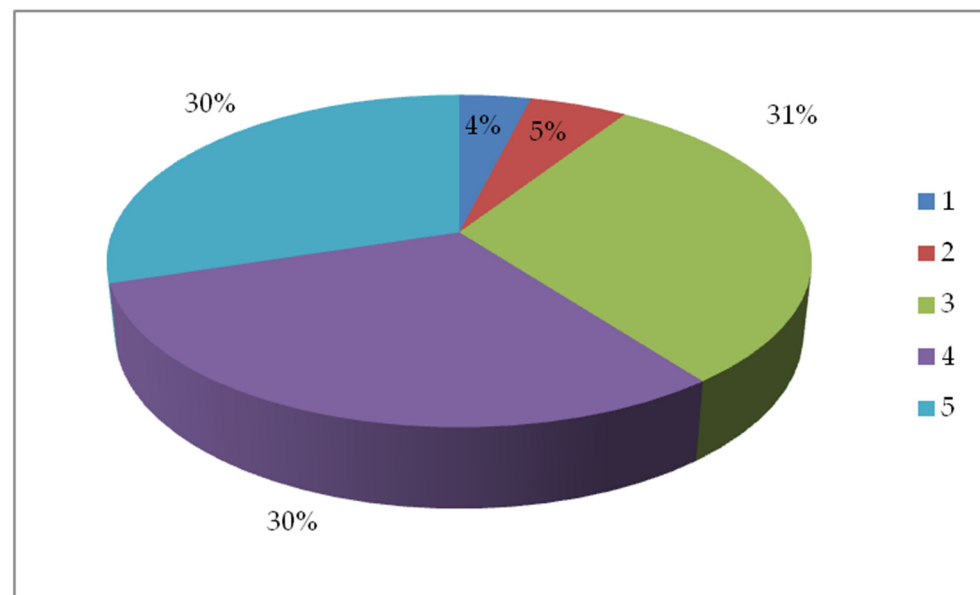


Figure 4. Satisfaction rating with internet connection quality. Source: authors’ findings.

The only thing about which the respondents did not show a clear position and at the same time, great mutual disagreement is that aggressive marketing can favor the creation and expansion of families. It is possible that they are not aware of the opportunities provided by marketing, and that they are not even aware of how much it already affects their lives.

5.4. Cultural Sustainability

The culture of mass communications and the modern way of life, with extensive travelling—goes hand in hand with viruses [129]. Public figures, such as actors [130], athletes [131] and other celebrities living and working in rural areas indicate their strengths and values. Some took advantage of it to create an outdoor film studio [132]. Piljevic and Jovicic [133] say that the first groups of tourists from abroad who want to see where famous films and series are shot have started to arrive. The famous director, Kusturica, also built settlements such as Drvengrad, the rural settlement of Iver, and Kamengrad and Andrićgrad [134]. Only a quarter of the respondents confirmed that they had noticed this phenomenon, while half said that they were not informed about it (Table 9). Nothing was intentionally suggested when asking this question. However, from the comments of the respondents who agreed with this statement, it can be concluded that such a lifestyle requires a lot of money and time. Respondents are glad that such things are happening near them. They undoubtedly generate a greater or lesser number of jobs and tourism; however, on the basis of works [135–137] and scientific attention, etc., they testify that the prices of nearby real estate are increasing, but they believe that it can bring better days to

their area. In addition, it is good to note that the entrepreneurial initiatives of these people are present in various localities in Serbia.

Serbia has begun to envisage its formula for a rural renaissance (H5), only the idea of it needs to be better disseminated. Rural communities are less likely to have access to the cultural and creative sectors. Culture, art, and festivals can all be used to boost a territory's attractiveness, inventiveness, and ultimately reinvigorate local communities. Sustainable food and beverage production, as well as local gastronomy, encapsulate agricultural methods, rural landscapes, local history and traditions, and represent a territory's cultural heritage [17]. Abandoned villages in Italy are 'revived' by launching cultural events and gathering artists, organizing festivals, fairs or tourist promotions, where artists are offered a free stay, art workshops, craft schools, or active holidays with work and study are organized.

The Council of Europe [138] regards culture's contribution to rural sustainability as involving and engaging local stakeholders in the creative industries. Along hiking paths, minor activities such as tiny concerts, open-air movies, and theater performances might be held. According to Cappelli and Cini [139], strengthening such ties can help boost local microeconomy even in non-crisis situations by increasing local employment and improving people's quality of life, as well as contributing to the regeneration of rural areas. According to Escher [140], rediscovering local cultural and ecological assets along hiking routes provides excellent opportunity for less-explored communities to earn notoriety and strengthen their local economies. In such an emergency, ensuring the health and safety of local residents and hikers could be difficult. Hiking routes, according to De Luca et al. [17], are among the safest tourism destinations in the current COVID-19 crisis, due to the inherent nature of such activities, which can easily adapt to the current imposed social distancing rules and naturally take place in an open-air natural environment, facilitating their adaptation to the current challenge.

6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed three important and positive things. The first relates to raising awareness of the importance of maintaining hygiene, leading a healthy life, and the benefits of living in sparsely populated areas. The second refers to solidarity, in terms of helping each other, but also a sense of empathy and responsibility towards others. The third fact is that the restriction of movement outside the borders of the state served as a reminder that numerous food, social, cultural, and tourist needs can be well met within Serbia, as well. All of them contribute to improving the sustainability of rural areas. It is very important to build awareness of the features of rural areas and transfer information about them. Media (as Tourism TV, Balkan Trip, Agro tv, etc.) approved that many parts of rural Serbia are already finding their local distinctiveness and identity, as well as building their own local brand for regeneration.

There are negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic observed and present in rural areas of Serbia, which confirmed the first (H1). The existence of significant changes in the functioning of life in the countryside was confirmed; that is, the COVID-19 pandemic brought evident changes in various segments of agricultural activity (H2). The chance of the village's sustainability is that, due to its characteristics, it facilitates life in the conditions of a pandemic (H3). Although it was assumed that the largest differences in responses would be found among respondents from different parts of the country, this did not happen in the expected volume (H4). Out of 54 offered attitudes, statistically significant differences in the respondents who inhabit different regions of Serbia were determined in only two opinions. Mueller et al. [18], in their research, found that the most notable trends are similarities, rather than differences, across groups. Both direct experience with and impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic are widely shared across the population.

Due to the disagreement of the respondents, hypothesis (H7), related to environmental sustainability, was rejected. Hypotheses related to respondents' attitudes towards proposals that can positively affect economic and sociodemographic sustainability (H8 and H9) were

confirmed. Tourism is the greatest chance for the sustainability of the village, which is directly visible in the answers of the respondents, related to tourist trends. Indirectly, consequently, there are hints of problems in movement and the opportunities provided by the organization of cultural events in rural areas. In support of this is the promotion of rural life by public figures, which could be called the formula for the ‘rural renaissance’ (H5). At the same time, the already confirmed Italian model ‘smart working villages’ can be applied in Serbia (H6).

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