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# CULTURAL POTENTIALS IN THE FUNCTION OF THE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF VRBAS MUNICIPALITY

*Jelena Premović<sup>1</sup>; Radovan Pejanović<sup>2</sup>;*

## **Abstract**

*Vrbas Municipality has versatile cultural potentials which can contribute to sustainable tourism and economic development of the local area.*

*Rich material and non-material cultural heritage of Vrbas was built during the centuries, in the process of continual immigration and emigration, migrations and colonization.*

*The main aim of the paper is to point out the importance of the nurture of the quality cultural contents and manifestations as the bases of the Municipality's recognition on the tourist maps of Serbia and Western Balkans.*

*In the analysis of tourist offer and cultural life of the Municipality, appropriate qualitative methodology was applied such as the methods of analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive, descriptive and comparative methods.*

*Key Words: cultural potentials, cultural heritage, sustainable development, cultural tourism, Vrbas Municipality.*

*JEL classification: O13, O18, Q01, Q57, Z32.*

## **Introduction**

Vrbas is a melting pot of nationalities and cultures where 26 different ethnic groups live together honoring and respecting each other's traditions and values; the majority are the Serbs, then Montenegrins, Rusyns, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Yugoslavs, and Croatians. Cultural heritage of Vrbas is rich and woven over centuries through constant migration of

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<sup>1</sup> Jelena Premović, PhD, Municipality of Vrbas, Maršala Tita no. 89, 21460 Vrbas, Serbia, Phone: +381(0)641441798, jelena.premovic@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Radovan Pejanović, Ph.D., Full Professor, University of Novi Sad - Faculty of Agriculture, Trg Dositeja Obradovića no. 8, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia, Phone: +381(0)63 600217, E-mail: pejanovic@polj.uns.ac.rs.

people. Its cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is a significant touristic resource which supports the sustainability of the touristic and economic prosperity of the community.

Apart from natural resources, cultural development is also important for the development of tourism. Why is it important to study national culture?

One part of the answer can be found in the thought of Lawrence Harkins who says "Underdevelopment is the state of mind". As a matter of fact, culture influences the behavior of the individuals and their contribution to the process of economical and social development, as well as their economical choices and making business decisions. Culture is a presumption to every thorough change in the society or the life of an individual, points out the sociologist Ratko Bozovic. He considers that it is the culture that communicates to the world, not the actions of the world power seekers.

Therefore, cultural values can have both a positive or negative influence on the social and economical development. Every social and economical system becomes a specific "cultural capital". The economist Veselin Vukotic says that economy development is a cultural process. The relation between cultural and economical development becomes important subject of discussion in European frameworks.

### **The importance and potentials of culture**

Studying national culture, "national character", i.e. "social genotype" is of a great importance. A famous economist, a Nobel laureate, Douglas Norht thinks that the "social genotype" of the former socialist countries has numerous instruments ("social syndromes") which impede the affirmation of the modern market economy. Therefore, it is difficult to establish new institutions here, and to remove the old ones. It is due to the inertness of the "social genotype", which greatly influences the slow transition and inhibits the efficiency of the reforms. The reasons for this are numerous: historical, geopolitical, religious, social-economic, etc. All these factors have their own expression in the national culture. Culture is an important development resource of the modern society (Pejanović, 2013).

The notion of culture in the narrow sense implies artistic creation, and in its broad sense it includes the total lifestyle of a national and social community. Cultural heritage includes material and non-material cultural

heritage. Material is divided into immovable (culture monuments, archeological sites and sights) and movable (museum collections, archive collection, audiovisual and cinema collections, library collections). Immaterial cultural heritage (oral tradition, folklore, crafts, mythology and rituals, festivals, costumes).

Vrbas municipality has all these cultures. The sector of the cultural creation includes: theatre, opera, ballet, visual arts- painting, sculpture, drawing, graphic, applied arts. Creative industries include: cinematography, radio, television, literary works and publishing, music. Tradition is an organic part of every nation's culture, which means that it through the piled experience establishes the cultural patterns as the most important forms of the primary conscience and behavior culture.

However, cultural patterns are not a simple consequence of cultural tradition, but through the process of spontaneous and organized modeling they acquire the greatest influence right from the cultural past. Vrbas municipality has a rich cultural heritage. The characteristic of a national culture is that it has a long tradition and that it changes very slowly, much slower than ideas. Without knowing the "deep layers and network of the national characteristics – conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational, constructive and destructive- it is difficult to understand the complex spiritual and cultural identity of a nation, which has grown out of those foundations" says the psychologist Žarko Trebješanin.

Vrbas has a very rich national culture. It is marked by a long history and continual colonization. The first is proved by the turbulent history of Vrbas.

The history of Vrbas goes back into the distant past. Although Vrbas is first mentioned in the written sources in 1387, thanks to the archeological diggings on the Carnok, Suvakov Salas and brickyard "Polet" sites, we have become familiar with many other things from its past. Carnok is a Celtic opidum (earth fortification) which was first a sales center, and later it gets a fortifying role, too.

From the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC these areas were splashed by the waves of different peoples, brought here during the great migrations. The Avars remained longest, which is certified by the necropolis on the brickyard "Polet" site. The beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century is also the ending of the

Avars dominance, but the control was overtaken by the Franks, and then Bulgarians.

At the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Ugrian tribes came to the Pannonia Plain. This is certified by the necropolis from the 10<sup>th</sup> century with their nomadic characteristics, and by the medieval settlements explored in this area.

Although the year 1387 is taken as the year of Vrbas foundation, the town was mentioned early in 1213, when the name “Orbaspalotaja“ occurs as the seat of the two noblemen properties.

According to the written sources this area was mainly settled with the Slavic people (Serbs), which fled from the settlement on several occasions due to wars, floods or diseases. The citizens were mostly mentioned in the tax books (Turkish books) - the tax book of the Sombor Nahiye (Sombor county) and the Great Segedin Sanjak from 1570. Also the Vienna Court Archive has some information about the inhabited villages and about the citizens from the census of the soldiers. The year 1720 is the year of great changes in ethnic ratio in Backa. Serbs moved to Russia and Banat, and the colonization of Rusyns, Germans and Hungarians began in this area. The Rusyns settled in Vrbas in 1745, in Kucura in 1763. The Germans started settling in 1784, while there are no precise information on the settling of the Hungarians, except that after the year 1890 they started settling Stari Vrbas on a greater scale.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to the digging of the canal and construction of the railway Budapest – Subotica – Novi Sad, Vrbas became a big industrial, crafts and trade center. New primary, vocational schools and a grammar school were opened. That process directly influenced the strengthening of the newly formed civil class, which became the main carrier of the cultural, social and economical life.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the workers gathered in the vocational unions, strikes occurred one after another, and World War II began in 1941. Less than four years later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> October, Vrbas was liberated from the fascism. After the war the city was settled by the citizens from Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and Metohija (organised colonization).

Migrations in Vojvodina brought the people from various parts of Europe. It contributed to the more versatile economy and cultural diversity.

### **Methodology**

A national culture is based on clear delineation of its identity, but also on its possibilities for dissemination, development perspectives, and its appraisal in the international, multicultural, and transcultural arena. Bearing in mind the specific national genotype and cultural identity of the residents, one of the strategic areas of cultural development in Vrbas is the respect, evaluation, preservation, and development of all the elements of culture that were built in through the ages and by various civilizational formations (Strategija razvoja opštine Vrbas 2014-2020).

The basic hypothesis underlying this paper is that the municipality of Vrbas has various cultural potentials to use as means of sustainable touristic and economic development of the local community.

In support of the hypothesis, the authors have analyzed the available touristic offer and cultural events in Vrbas, emphasizing the importance of preservation of its intangible cultural heritage as a unique selling point and characteristic feature of the municipality in the general touristic landscape of Serbia.

In this analysis adequate qualitative methodology such as: the methods of analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive, descriptive and comparative methods was applied.

### **Cultural life and cultural-historical appeal of Vrbas**

The important milestone in the history of cultural development in Vrbas is the foundation of the local library “Danilo Kiš” with its branches in the five major settlements of the municipality on February 22, 1962; and the foundation of the Culture House on February 5, 1968.

Nowadays, Cultural Center, which is the result of the institutional reorganization of the Culture House in 2002, is the hub of cultural events in Vrbas. Since its foundation, the Cultural Center offers a variety of services: museum and gallery exhibitions, literary panels, publications, festivals, and different stage performances (folklore, ballet, poetry reading, plays, etc.). In addition to institutional support to creative work

through the Library and the Cultural Center, civil societies also participate in catering to the cultural needs of the people in Vrbas. The data gathered from the City Hall shows that there are 56 registered civil societies in the municipality of Vrbas whose area of interest range from preservation of cultural heritage and minority customs to various aspects of art (music, painting, visual arts, literature, and theatre).

The most prominent organizations are: ULUV (The Vrbas Association of Painters), VUM (The Vrbas Association of Artists), then artist societies such as Savo Vukosavljević, Žetva, Vuk Mandušić, Sirmaj Karolj, Karpati, also Njogoš - the Association of Gusle Players, The Vojvodina Association of Gusle Players, The Association of Montenegrins, The Association of Krajišnik - Krajina, Karitas Civil Society, Oteto od zaborava Ethno Club. In addition, there are cultural-historical appeals of Vrbas to complete the touristic offer and support the sustainability of the local development.

The most important cultural and hysterical monuments in Vrbas are:

- Serbian Orthodox Church built in from 1730-1738,
- Evangelistic (Lutheran) Church built about 1824 after the settlement of the Germans in 1785,
- Vodice Chapel, a unique type of chapel specific for Vojvodina and Slavonia, built in 1793,
- Reformatory (Calvinist) Church built in the same period as Evangelistic,
- The construction of the Methodist Church began just before the World War I, and completed in 1921,
- Grammar School “Žarko Zrenjanin“ was founded in 1809 as a Latin school, in 1835 it was renamed into Patron Real Gymnasia, in 1872 into Patron Lower Gymnasia, in 1893 into Communal Gymnasia, in 1921 into Comprehensive Real Gymnasia, and in 1947 into Real Mixed Gymnasia,
- Museum in Vrbas municipality was founded in 1968 and it changed several locations. Today, it is located in the old Municipal building. The Museum collection includes several thousand museum exhibits, excluding the exhibits which are in the Vojvodina Museum. The most important exhibits include the ones found in Carnok, Brickyard “Polet” and Suvakov Salas. Of the great importance are the exhibits which marked the lifestyle of the people and nations through history on the Vrbas municipality territory,

- Monument to the engineer Jožefu Kiš (1748-1813) is located on the hill near the Vrbas hydro-junction (i.e. Šlajz). This monument is devoted to the memory of the Great Backa (Franc's) Canal designer, who wanted to be buried on Šlajz since it was the place from where the first probe works had started,
- Base Center or Bapina's Base is the most famous illegal base on the Vrbas municipality territory from the World War II period. It is located in 137 Milivoje Cobanski St. The frontal, residential part of the house contains the objects, photographs and other exhibits used by the illegals. In the rear part of the backyard, there is a separate small house, base, the place for the operation of the illegals. It is importance because it reflects the interior and exterior appearance of a Serbian country house from 19<sup>th</sup> century (According to: Opština Vrbas, 2017).

### **Cultural manifestations as basis for the development of festival tourism**

Today, Vrbas offers a plethora of cultural contents and manifestations from various domains of art during the whole year. The Cultural Calendar lists over thirty different events.

The most popular are:

- The festival of the youth poetry, set up 40 years ago is the oldest and the most important cultural event in Vrbas municipality. It is also one of the most important poetry events in the country.
- The youth Palette is the biggest accompanying event to the Festival of the Youth Poetry and it gathers a dozen of the most talented young professional painters from all over the country, who are selected by a famous art critics.
- Festival of Vojvodina folklore traditions was established 30 years ago, and was held in many Vojvodina municipalities. Upon the Decision of the Institute and Vrbas Municipality, the festival is to become a permanent event and will be held in Vrbas in September.
- Autumn Arts Salon was founded in 1968 and represents the oldest event of this kind in the municipality. Salon is held in October or November and lasts for about twenty days.
- Kostelnik's Autumn is an inter-municipality musical and poetic event, a gathering of choirs organised by KDP Karpati and KC Vrbas. This event takes place in November.

- The Night of Museums is a cultural event organised by museums and cultural institutions, during which museums are opened for the visitors from 6 pm to 2 am. The aim of this event is to present the museums and galleries in a funnier and unusual way. It takes place in May.
- Neven's Festival of Children-Poets has been taking place in Savino Selo since 1989. It has an international character and is recognized by the work with talented children and writers. Children authors compete with their poems and short lyrical stories in Serbian language. Festival's publishing activity includes a special edition which is The first book of the most talented poet, i.e. poetess.
- Triangl Art Colony in Savino Selo takes place traditionally in May when it draws together a lot of outstanding and talented artists who in a three-day period create their paintings.
- Kucurska žetva (Kucura Harvest) is an event where Rusynian and Ukrainian folklore ensembles perform together with several ensembles of other national communities from Vojvodina. The aim of the festival is to preserve and nourish the folklore tradition of Rusyns and other national communities.
- Tamburitza Festival in Zmajevu is devoted to the Sava Vukosavljev, born in Zmajevu who is one of the most prominent personalities on the music scene of Vojvodina during the second half of the last century.
- Fijakerijada (Fiacre Festival) in Ravno Selo is a traditional cavalry event of parade and competitive character. It is held in July and August, in organization of Mustang Cavalry Club from Ravno Selo (Opština Vrbas, 2017).
- Especially interesting is the newly established The Ravno Selo Film Festival whose founder is a famous Serbian actor, producer, and director, Lazar Ristovski, who was born in the village of Ravno selo. It is an international film festival and this year it will be held on June 23-27.

This year will be particularly rich in cultural shows as it will feature various anniversaries, such as 40 years of Vojvodina Folklore Traditions Festival, 50 years of the Cultural Center Art Gallery, 35 years of ULUV Art Colony, 60 years of the Music School, and 30 years of the Children's Poetry Festival – Neven.

## **The Youth Poetry Festival**

The Youth Poetry Festival is the oldest and the most important cultural show in the region established in 1968; it features poets younger than 27. Namely, on May 7, 1968 a poetry festival in Vrbas “May - month of plain and youth“ presented over fifty young poets from: Sombor, Kula, Vrbas, Srbobran, and Bačka Palanka. This marks the beginning of the festival which will turn into a competitive event, The Yugoslav Youth Poetry Festival, the following year.

Ever since, the Youth Poetry Festival has been fostering highest literary values and nurtures poets younger than 27. Every year, young poets from all over the Balkan - Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Slovenia - enter the contest with a collection of ten poems. It is this Festival that witnessed the birth of contemporary Serbian poets such as: Radimir Mićunović, Raša Livada, Branko Kukić, Mladen Srđan Volareić, Marija Šimoković, Tatjana Lukić, Jovan Nikolić, Zoran Đerić, Saša Jelenković, Gojko Božović, Radimir Andrić, Dragomir Brajković, Milan Nenadić, Vujica Rešin Tucić, Darinka Jevrić, Miodrag Raičević, and many more.

The festival also gave rise to local poets Blagoje Baković and Miroslav Aleksić. The framework of the festival promoted the foundation of the Vrbas School of Poetry Reading, whose founder was Rajko Šoć and the current director is Vesna Drinčić Đilas. The prestige of the Festival was further raised by such Serbian poets as Desanka Maksimović, Oskar Davić, Gustav Krklec, Branko Ćopić, Dušan Kostić, Miroslav Antić, Ivan V. Lalić, Izet Sarajlić, Duško Trifunović, Jure Kaštelan, Matija Bečković, Ciril Zlobeca, Branislav Petrović, Rajko Petrov Nogo, and others.

During the five decades of the Festival, over ten thousand young poets applied for the contest. The chosen finalists have the opportunity to present their works in front of the poetry-loving people of Vrbas. The winners are presented with valuable awards, while the winner is offered a book deal. The Festival is organized annually, last week in May, and lasts for five days. There are also a number of side events such as The Opening Ceremony, an exhibition, A Portrait of a Poet, A Trip to Prose, Poets' Rally, panel discussions, book promotions of the last year's winner, Slam Poetry Contest, Children's Lyrical Program, The Closing Ceremony, and many more.

In the 1976 Festival, an exhibition entitled “Yugoslav youth palette” was established as a side event. More than 250 artists from ex-Yugoslavia participated in the exhibition making the Festival a meeting place not only for poets, but also painters, art critics, and art historians. In addition to regular side events, the Festival often features specific programs in cooperation with the Grammar school “Žarko Zrenjanin” and vocational school “4. juli” from Vrbas.

To celebrate the 50th anniversary, in 2018, the organizers will publish the anthology of poems by the previous 49 winners, as well as this year’s laureate; they will also produce a documentary TV series about the Festival in cooperation with the Radio and Television of Vojvodina.

Such cultural potentials are a basis for the development of cultural and festival tourism. Although the municipality of Vrbas has a rich and varied cultural offer, the market results are not satisfactory. To support this, Table 1 shows current tourist trends in Vrbas.

Table 1: *Tourism trends in the period 2005–2016 in Vrbas Municipality*

year	Tourists			Overnights			Average no. of overnights	
	total:	domestic:	foreign:	total:	domestic:	foreign:	domestic:	foreign:
2005	5,086	4,188	898	14,593	12,518	2,075	3.0	2.3
2006	9,304	5,346	3,958	22,055	17,787	4,268	3.3	1.1
2007	10,186	4,445	5,741	19,354	12,457	6,897	2.8	1.2
2008	12,415	7,900	4,515	17,635	12,054	5,581	1.5	1.2
2009	7,520	5,555	1,965	11,226	8,770	2,456	1.6	1.2
2010	4,044	3,704	340	29,341	28,740	601	7.8	1.8
2011	4,914	3,995	919	12,951	11,577	1,374	2.9	1.5
2012	4,958	4,190	768	10,575	8,817	1,758	2.1	2.3
2013	3,561	2,795	768	7,539	5,694	1,845	2.0	2.4
2014	6,264	4,492	1,772	17,014	12,793	4,221	2.8	2.4
2015	6,728	5,523	1,205	23,163	21,118	2,045	3.8	1.7
2016	6,226	4,285	1,941	10,621	7,916	2,705	1.8	1.4

Source: *Authors’ calculation based on the: Republički zavod za statistiku. (2005-2016), Opštine u Srbiji.*

In 2016, Vrbas witnessed the inflow of 6,226 tourists who amassed total of 10,621 overnight stays, which is 500 tourists and almost half overnight stays less than in 2015. It is safe to describe it as a negative tourist trend.

In order to secure a long term progress of tourism trends, the funding of tourism production must quantitatively and qualitatively be oriented towards increasing the value of and providing the opportunity for adjusting the nature and culture (Pejanović & Premović, 2017).

According to the presented data, it is evident that the tourist potentials of this municipality are inadequately identified and valorized in the market. This deficiency is especially marked in the promotion of cultural and anthropogenic touristic potentials and the funding of the cultural and festival tourism.

Although the Youth Poetry Festival is a brand that stepped outside the confines of a single municipality half a century ago, it is still not fully exploited in support to the sustainability of the touristic and economic development.

### **Concluding considerations**

Cultural tourism nowadays carries the progress of tourism industry.<sup>3</sup> European Culture Capitals (ECoCs) is one of the most successful initiatives coming from the EU in the field of culture, creativity, urban development, and building social cohesion and tourism.

Each city that took part in the project organized and experienced a year of culture in their own ways starting with the interpretation of European dimensions of their own programs by defining a range of strategic aims in cultural development, economic support to the promotion of tourism, and solving different problems in planning and implementation of the activities.

For example, in 2010, cities of Pécs in Hungary, Essen (with the Ruhr region) in Germany, and Istanbul in Turkey shared the title of ECoC. There are considerable differences between the three cities in terms of population number, political status, social and economic history, cultural reputation, and their overall aims.

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<sup>3</sup> See: New Spaces in cultural tourism, University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Sciences, Department of geography, Tourism and hotel management, Abstract book, Novi Sad, 1-2 September 2017.

However, they all aimed at transforming their identity and image to become more appealing to the residents, investors, and visitors. Such a privilege was bestowed upon the city of Novi Sad, which will be a capital of culture in 2021. This is a unique opportunity for other cities in Vojvodina to present their cultural heritage; therefore, the exploration of the cultural potentials of Vrbas, which is very close to Novi Sad, is an important task.

Today, tourists require life experiences which are not advertised in a tourist brochure. If they feel secure enough, they will ask questions, banter, explore undiscovered or unbranded sites, and mix with the locals thus experiencing the true nature of a place. Cultural habits and practices can be turned into goods and services, especially if they are contextualized and tied to a cultural show, such as a festival, thus becoming a sustainable resources for (re)interpretation of physical environment (countryside, streets, architecture, historical and modern). Generally, events, whether they are family reunions or public festivals, constantly reimagine the identity of a place.

The citizens can contribute to creating unique experiences for their families and friends if they feel free to express their feelings and attitudes. That in turn becomes a point of interest for the tourists because that makes them the witnesses and participants in, at the same time, quite ordinary and exclusive, event. Therefore, the tourism policy which aims at attracting demanding, but refined tourists should cooperate with civil societies, artists' associations, etc.

Having a cutting edge on the market depends on the competences of the manager and other staff, who, directly or indirectly, participate in the creation of the touristic offer. The quality of the touristic product depends on the quality of the human resources; furthermore, the market and economic gain depends on their knowledge and expertise and is reflected through the satisfaction of the customers (Premović, 2016). The level of the cultural development is directly proportional to the quality of the human resources. Culture shows are an important element of the cultural life which is in turn a determining factor of the cultural tourism.

Participants and visitors of the Youth Poetry Festival, including other culture shows, are the best ambassadors of Vrbas in the region and beyond. Hospitality, openness, and friendliness of the local population

play an important role in creating a quality touristic product and in helping Vrbas to be recognized a tourist attraction.

During the opening ceremony of the 43rd Festival in 2011, the then president of the Serbian Association of Writers, Radomir Andrić noted that this Festival is one of the most eminent literary events at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Vrbas as multiethnic community always cherished its poets and poetry dedicated to love and human accomplishments; he therefore believed that Vrbas was often considered a home of poetry to those who visited, worked, and performed here.

Vrbas was often eternalized in poems and rhymes, but not a lot of cities can claim such a number of poems in its glory and honor. In 1990, the “Danilo Kiš“ Library established a literary award “Stanko Simićević“ for the best poem about Vrbas created during the Festival.

Maybe the biggest contribution to the promotion of the Festival and the city of Vrbas came from a poet, Gustav Krklec who named Vrbas the first Olympus in the plain. Then, there was Duško Trifunović, one of the founders and the first participants of the Festival, who described his days spent in Vrbas as the three best days in May. Radomir Mićunović, the first winner of the Festival poured his impressions into a poem about Vrbas which described Vrbas as a city on a poet’s hand, a city of youth and love.

Owing to Duško Trifunović and the musicians Gabor Lenđel and Narcis Vučina, this poem became the anthem of the Festival, while its opening line “A City on a Poet's Hand“ became the title of the anthology of poems about Vrbas.

These are all strategic advantages of Vrbas which have not yet been fully exploited to make it a center of culture in Vojvodina and Serbia. Unfortunately, the benefits of the cultural potentials have not been reaped to their fullest capacities. There is evidence of certain inertness and disinterest present in the tourism workers of Vrbas, who are, on the other hand, best equipped to promote and present the cultural and tourism resources that Vrbas has to offer.

The municipality of Vrbas already exhibits all the necessary requirements to be recognized as a leading city in cultural and festival tourism in

Vojvodina and Serbia. When planning the tourism policy and creating the offer, the most prominent place should be reserved for festivals and culture shows. The Youth Poetry Festival is a unique brand which won the titles of *poemopolis* and *culturopolis* for Vrbas since 1968. It is a strategic advantage that needs to be transformed into a competitive touristic benefit. Cultural policy on all three levels (local, county, and state) should account for exploiting all the potentials of Vrbas with the aim of social and economic progress.

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