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Reflecting on the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue

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Ján Figel', born 1960, is currently Member of the European Commission responsible for Education, Training, Culture and Youth. In the years 1998 to 2003 he was the Chief Negotiator of the Slovak Republic for negotiations on the accession of Slovakia to the EU. During the hearing in the European Parliament before entering into his present office in September 2004 he suggested to organize the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue what became reality in 2008. He wrote several hundreds of contributions to periodical press. His main book publications are "Slovakia on the Road to the European Union - Chapters and Contexts", (together with Miroslav Adamiš) and "Maturation for Europe" (Negotiator's Chronicle). He was awarded with several awards, among others the "Human Tolerance and Humanitarian Award" (The Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Science, Washington DC), "Knight of the Honorary Legion" (President of the French Republic), "The Interfaith Gold Medallion" (International Council of Christian and Jews, Cambridge, Great Britain). Several universities awarded him as "Honorary professor" and "Doctor honoris causa".

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Reflecting on the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue

1 Recent Developments

The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue was initially conceived as the Barroso Commission came into office. When I brought this idea to the audience during my introductory hearing in the European Parliament, I saw it mainly as a response to the substantial changes in EU composition and the internal perceptions of people. Towards the end of 2004 it was clear that the European institutions should use their influence and visibility to put the issue of intercultural dialogue firmly on the table of European and national debates. A co-ordinated initiative was deemed necessary and even urgent because the social and cultural landscape had changed dramatically in many parts of Europe in the few preceding years.

One such change was the historic enlargement of May 2004 - followed by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria less than three years later - which stretched the borders of the EU to include almost half a billion people. As many readers will remember, in the run-up to that historic date voices were raised from several quarters expressing concern that such enlargement goes too far, that it is a problem. As a European of Slovak descent, I am very happy to note that the history of the past four years has proven those fear mongers wrong. Of course, there have been difficult situations here and there, but the experience of the past few years has shown that the worst fears were exaggerated. In fact, the enlargements of 2004 and 2007 have proven to be an intercultural-dialogue success. We should all be proud - in both the older and newer countries of the Union alike - that the countries of

Central and Eastern Europe have contributed to Europe's economic, social and cultural growth in the past few years.

The second reason why 2008 is devoted to intercultural dialogue has to do with the migratory flows that reach Europe from beyond its outer borders. Migration from other regions of the world has a long tradition in several European countries, especially those with a colonial past. For instance British authorities actively recruited Caribbean workers to face labour shortages in certain industries during the period of reconstruction that followed the end of WWII. For other countries, instead, immigration is a more recent phenomenon. Italy's migratory flows, for instance, have been negative for most of its history. According to United Nations (UN) figures,¹ in the ten years after 1950 Italy had about one million more emigrants than immigrants. By contrast, between the years 1990 and 2000 the net migratory balance was plus 1,161,000. As a result of these trends, today the government² reckons there are 2,415,000 legal immigrants in Italy - up from 1,340,000 in 2000 - and almost half of them come from other European countries. Currently, Italy's legal immigrants represent about five percent of its total population, and similar percentages can be found in a number of other European countries. Looking at the aggregate figures, in 2006 slightly less than six percent of the EU's population was composed of foreigners (non-nationals originating from other EU countries and non-nationals from non-member countries). The proportion ranged from a high of 39.6% in Luxembourg and upwards of 10% in Latvia, Estonia,³ Cyprus and Ireland to less than one percent of the total population in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. Generally the majority of foreigners that have settled in most of the Member States are from other (often neighbouring) European countries. It is obvious that the presence of migrants is not evenly spread across the territory of the Union. Therefore, it is more common for Europeans who

1 United Nations Population Division (2001) World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision. (POP/DB/WPP/Rev) 2000/1/F10.

2 [http://www.interno.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/15/0673_Rappor to_immigrazione_BARBAGLI.pdf](http://www.interno.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/15/0673_Rappor%20to_immigrazione_BARBAGLI.pdf)

3 Foreigners in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania include former Soviet citizens who have not applied for the citizenship of their country of residence.

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live in big cities and in the areas where foreign workers are most needed to meet with foreigners, including people of non-European origin. Many regions and cities in Europe have become home to sizable communities with diverse backgrounds. A special Eurobarometer study⁴ of November 2007 carried out in preparation for the European Year gives interesting answers in this respect. The survey asked people whether they had had interaction with at least one person of a different religion, ethnic background or nationality in the previous week. 65% replied that they did; which means that multicultural societies are a fact of life in Europe today. What did Europeans think of their increased intercultural contacts? How did they react to Europe's growing multicultural landscape? 72% of EU citizens believed that people with a different background (ethnic, religious or national) enriched the cultural life of their country. At the same time, two-thirds of EU citizens believed that the young generations should preserve their family and cultural traditions. These data give a slightly more optimistic picture with respect to the findings of another survey on European Social Reality,⁵ carried out a year earlier, according to which 54% of the persons surveyed felt that immigrants enriched the cultural life of their country, while 30 % of respondents disagreed with this statement. This survey also found that a sizeable proportion of respondents associated the presence of people from other ethnic groups with insecurity. According to the survey, this connection was made by 42 % of the population in the EU-25; however, an almost equal proportion (41 %) of respondents thought otherwise.

On the basis of these data, it is safe to say that Europeans look at immigration - both internal and external - under a quite positive light, but this general assessment covers an array of different views. The impression is that the views on immigration - and the related views towards one's relations with people of different background - are distributed in a field structured by two magnetic poles: openness towards others and the willingness to preserve the traditional values of native and non-native communities. This dialectical tension poses interesting challenges to any policy designed to favour integration, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. This is espe-

4 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_217_sum_en.pdf

5 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf

cially apparent when one moves from the petitions of principle to the practical decisions that translate public policies designed to improve relations between different communities, into practice. I believe that the real achievement of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue would be to combine these views; as to preserve one's own tradition does not inevitably select against openness towards others. It is often just the opposite: real interest in others and openness towards others are qualities shared among those whose identity and tradition are clear and deeply rooted in themselves.

The survey of November 2007 asked respondents to react spontaneously to the phrase "Intercultural dialogue in Europe". As many as 36% of respondents could not come up with any definite meaning. This finding is illuminating; it indicates that the notion of 'intercultural dialogue' is too vague if it is left unspecified. In contrast, issues such as the headscarf in public schools, the status of Islamic *madrassas*, and racially motivated crime perpetrated by neo-Nazi groups are determined with great clarity. These issues translate the notion of intercultural dialogue into real-life debates and hard decisions and this transition has the power to focus everybody's minds.

In short, why do we propose more intense dialogue between cultures? Culture is important, but it is an often misunderstood or undervalued base for the evolution of society and for the integration of people. Culture defines the values of every society, and values - we preserve and respect in the society - are the base of the unity. Cultural aspects define our individual and collective identities, therefore we need to pay more attention to cultural cooperation in Europe. The diversity of cultures relate through dialogue. In *dialogue*, which is the pillar of any community - local, national, and European - our societies are larger than the sum of their parts; when many can become one. At the same time, the daily practices of the principles that underpin our associated life renew and develop our heritage, thus creating a virtuous circle. Finally, the prefix *inter-* in "intercultural" is, for me, about our relations with others and relations within the social group. It means taking an interest in social and political life; it means going beyond simple passive compliance to rules and conventions; it means becoming active and responsible citizens, with open minds and hearts.

2 History

All this shows that fostering a culture of dialogue in Europe has become one of the key challenges for our Union; in this section I will argue that it is not a new one. In historical terms, Europe's process of integration has always been a giant process of intercultural dialogue - a fact that often goes unrecognised. We take pride in our common institutions, and the 'hard' policies, but we tend to underrate our 'soft' side, such as the ability to bridge cultural differences within a Union with hardly any internal borders left - among the younger generations. In the first half-century of its life, the process of European integration has privileged tangible policies such as the construction of an internal market among its member states; a level field where all economic actors could compete on an equal basis; and the integration of official policies through common institutions and regular meetings among national authorities. This has resulted in a level of cooperation among sovereign countries that has almost no precedent in history - and certainly none on a regional scale. In this sense, our Union is the most daring legal and institutional innovation of our age. The whole world has been following our experiment with keen interest and our achievements have been recognised by all the leading political and intellectual figures. However, it seems that Europe's progress is losing steam. It is a bit of a paradox that the public opinion began to fall out of love with Europe as the Union was achieving two giant goals: the introduction of the common currency and the historic enlargements towards Central and Eastern Europe. The historical and geopolitical reasons for this drop in popularity of the European project would take us too far; instead I would just like to point out one reason that is broadly cultural in character.

Our fellow Europeans are disoriented as to what the EU really stands for; perhaps we have forgotten our ultimate goals because we have put too much stress on Europe's 'concrete achievements' - spectacular as they have been. Perhaps we have not insisted enough on what keeps us all together; on the historical, cultural and civic values that are the bricks and mortar of our common house. The phrase 'concrete achievements' comes from Schuman's declaration of May 9th 1950; I would like to quote the whole passage from which I have lifted it: "Europe will not be made all at once,

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or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity". In 1950, the ultimate goal of Robert Schuman and of the other founding fathers of Europe was clear: their main preoccupation was to ensure long-lasting peace on the continent. It should not come as a surprise that achievements should be concrete and factual solidarity should not come too soon. Things have changed beyond recognition since then and our ambitions have become both bolder and more timid. The European project has been so successful in securing peace among the members of our Union that we take it for granted today. The peaceful resolution of differences and conflicting interests has become the bedrock on which we have built higher goals for our Union over the years. So, in this respect the Union has broader ambitions. On the other hand, there seems to be a lack of vision among European leaders as to the direction Europe should take in the next half century and beyond. This is another effect of our excessive reliance on concrete achievements: we are unsure where we want to go because the reasons why we are together have become perhaps too ordinary. As a consequence, our vision for the EU ten, twenty or fifty years down the road is becoming blurred.

What to do? One approach would imply redefining our common values and realising that we share a future together much more than we share a common past. Above all - and as a precondition to a cultural re-foundation of the Union - Europeans need to get to know each other much better. We need to find ways to manage our wonderful diversity and turn it into value. We need a new civic and social compact for Europe. But before we can do that, it is imperative that we learn to talk to each other across the many cultural borders that criss-cross our continent. Milan Kundera, the French author of Czech origin, once wrote that "Europe is a maximum diversity in a minimum of living space". Even more importantly, it is imperative that we learn to listen to each other much better than we do today. We should learn to extend our feelings of belonging beyond our local and national communities and to add to our traditional allegiances a new sense of belonging; we must learn to become citizens of Europe.

3 Bringing Intercultural Dialogue more into the Daily Public Arena

Fostering a sense of European citizenship implies that it is time we turn the page. Europe must consolidate the formidable geopolitical success it has experienced over the past fifty years and grow deeper. We need to get to know each other better and we need to learn how we can live better with each other. It is only by making respect for cultural diversity our guiding principle that Europe will forge a true sense of belonging to a common space among its peoples and countries. I believe that it is a responsibility of the European institutions to help create the best conditions so that everyone living in the Union can realise that our growing diversity is our real asset. Consolidating our *unity* is part of the basic rationale of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. One of the objectives of the Year is turning into value our increased diversity and the more frequent interactions between the different cultures, languages, ethnic groups and religions that Europeans are experiencing on the continent and elsewhere.

The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue was designed to help European citizens and everyone living in the Union to deal with a more open and diverse environment by promoting the basic values of mutual respect and participatory European citizenship. The Year aims to raise the awareness of all those living in the EU, in particular young people, of the importance of respecting cultural diversity. Intercultural dialogue lies at the heart of the European project, closely linked with the concept of mutual respect and human dignity. It plays the role of a catalyst by promoting integration in many European policy areas. Intercultural dialogue should become a priority in many different policy fields at EU, national and local level in the coming years: employment, integration, migration, the fight against radicalization, external relations, minorities, multilingualism, education, culture, youth, media, etc. Intercultural dialogue plays a key role in addressing some of the most important challenges Europe is facing at present, in particular social cohesion and integration; it is also a vital ingredient in Europe's efforts to foster growth and jobs. To face these challenges, Europeans should hone their intercultural skills. In this respect, I would like to

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stress the role of education. How our education systems deal with diversity is a litmus test of the wellbeing of our societies. The doors to education, employment and to the active participation in social and cultural life should be open to all. Education is the best equaliser!

Focusing on the economic side, managing diversity is a crucial factor for local and regional development, cultural diversity being a driver for creativity, innovation, and competitiveness. Cultural diversity is an asset in the workplace; from this point of view I would also like to stress the importance of intercultural management and mediation. Intercultural dialogue should be more clearly embedded in companies' corporate social responsibility strategies. Although the European Year is focused on such areas as migration and integration, culture and the arts, media and education, it is also devoted to cultural relations in the workplace. The 2007 survey that took a snapshot of one week in the life of 27,000 people living in the 27 EU member states found that, after public spaces, the workplace was the second most common place where encounters with people from different cultures occurs: 49% of respondents mentioned they had met people from a different background at work, more than those who mentioned leisure, education and virtual spaces. Creating the best conditions for these encounters is one responsibility of companies as well as an opportunity. In business parlance, the term 'intercultural' originally referred to the need to develop new management skills as the workforce became increasingly diverse and companies expanded overseas. The meaning of the term has since expanded from its original focus on client management, marketing and human resources. It is becoming more and more evident that the companies that embrace intercultural dialogue benefit from an open and stimulating atmosphere that can contribute to productivity and profitability, whereas enterprises that allow frictions or hostilities to fester among staff because of cultural differences tend to be less stimulating and less effective.

How can we promote intercultural dialogue in practice during the European Year? First of all, we are encouraging reflection and policy input from civil society and from businesses through initiatives such as the Brussels Debates. Seven debates are held in Brussels throughout 2008, covering a range of intercultural-dialogue issues from interfaith dialogue to multilin-

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gualism and the role of the media and education. The debates are designed to provide a platform for reflection and exchange of ideas which can contribute to policy discussion on intercultural dialogue. At the same time, we encourage best-practice sharing among civil-society partners through our communication campaign, notably through the official website of the Year.⁶ Moreover, the European Commission is co-financing seven flagship projects covering different aspects of intercultural dialogue and using video, music, radio, writing stories and other means as their vehicles. Finally, there are national projects in all EU countries. One example is 'Culture trainer', coordinated by Volkswagen Germany. The aim of this project is to raise awareness and teach trainers and experts how to best work abroad with culturally diverse groups. The project associates partners from seven countries and deals with all aspects related to intercultural dialogue in a professional context (interrelations, cultural stereotypes, management of reactions according to the environment, etc). We realised that perceptions and opinions were just as important in the discourse of intercultural dialogue as hard facts and migration data. This is why we understood it would be vital to bring the debate to every nook and cranny of our societies: in our schools and universities, in the workplace and - of course - in the intellectual arena. We need to look at the increasingly diverse social and cultural mosaic of Europe with a clearer mind and a more pragmatic approach. We need to muster all the wisdom and imagination we are capable of to come to terms with this challenge and tackle it successfully.

The European Year represents an excellent opportunity to put the issue of intercultural dialogue on the table. Building on the results of the year, elaborating on a sustainable strategy for the future should become a long-term priority for the EU. To this end, the issue of intercultural dialogue has to be seriously addressed both at European and lower levels. Public authorities at all levels - local, national and international - have the responsibility to create a shared space where all generations and all groups can express themselves and can participate actively in the life of the societies in which they live (participatory society). Only in this way can Europe become an intercultural society, based on a respectful exchange of views be-

6 www.dialogue2008.eu

tween individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds, on an equal basis. We need to foster a healthy curiosity towards the ways, habits and beliefs of others; we need to promote the willingness to reach out, establish a contact and get to know each other better. We need to learn how to open our minds and our hearts!

There is a simple reason why fostering an attitude of curiosity towards those who are different from us is the first step in our strategy: because intolerance and mistrust are often the result of a lack of information, and it is quite natural for most human beings to fear the unknown. As a consequence, creating good conditions for a genuine intercultural dialogue implies going beyond mere tolerance. We want to go beyond multicultural societies, where cultures and cultural groups simply coexist side by side. Tolerance is not enough anymore; an attitude of mere tolerance often produces separate communities and physical and ideological ghettos. In the worst cases, it produces those parts of town where not even the police would enter without trepidation. In practice, creating an adequate climate for dialogue implies that no participant enters the dialogue in a dominant position. This strategy has an interesting implication: that we need to overcome the traditional logic of majority and minority in public discourse. While majority rule is still a viable instrument for our democratic life, we should not be contented with it; rather, we should find ways to respect and protect the rights and interests of minorities. The EU already provides a strong and effective guarantee in this sense. In the Union, we are all equal when it comes to our fundamental values, above all the respect for human rights. Going beyond the simplistic application of majority rule is one of the hallmarks of the Union; as a matter of fact, there is a sense in which the EU can be described as a union of minorities. First, because even the largest national community is still a minority of the total population of the EU; second, because the protection of the rights and interests of smaller countries is inscribed in its legal structure since the formal beginning of our process of integration in 1957. The principle of solidarity of the bigger with the smaller member states is, and must also stay in the future, one of the basic principles of the EU.

4 External Relations

The considerations I have sketched above are mostly limited to the EU internal affairs; as I said, our action on intercultural dialogue is primarily focused on allowing everyone living within the territory of the EU to get to know their fellow Europeans better. It is about creating societies based on greater solidarity and a real sense of community which goes across cultural divides, about seeing the points which bind us together, and not only those which divide us. But this is not the only effect we hope to achieve. Another important goal of the European Year is to try and improve our external relations. Cultural exchanges have traditionally paved the way for the international relations of the EU. For instance, the services of the European Commission under my responsibility have a long experience with the engagement of non-EU countries in our programmes for education, youth and culture ahead of their deeper and fuller involvement in the policies and institutions of the Union. This work of preparation has taken the form of academic exchange programmes, heritage preservation, and other forms of cultural cooperation. However, the way I think of intercultural dialogue in the context of the European Year goes one step further; I believe that fostering this debate is going to be extremely helpful for us in our relations with neighbouring countries and with our partners across the globe.

In addition, I am convinced that bringing intercultural dialogue into the limelight is going to make a great deal of difference for the social and civic development within each country that participates in the dialogue. I am also convinced that the deepest divide that open and honest dialogue must close is not the one between cultures; the real divide is *within* each culture. Different languages, beliefs and material habits have never prevented people of goodwill from talking to each other, establishing good relations, and progressing with each other's help. We encounter a problem of mutual understanding within nations, communities, companies and even families, and it is definitely not a question of the language. Mutual understanding and readiness for dialogue is more a question of openness!

As a rule, opportunities for dialogue with other cultures are taken up by sectors of the population that are more open to change: the young, the bet-

ter educated or the progressive wings of the political spectrum. As a consequence, fostering dialogue between cultures is also a move that, in principle, empowers those sectors; dialogue shifts power from the more conservative to the more progressive social forces. In doing so, dialogue breeds tolerance, respect and openness both between and *within* communities. This is crucial, because when intolerance and hatred against the foreign or unknown emerge in a community, the first victims are its own progressive elements. This is one of the expectations I have for 2008 and the years that will follow; we hope we can foster a culture of dialogue that will pervade our relations with our partner countries and their peoples and, in so doing, set up positive models to follow in all the communities that will take part in the dialogue.

5 Media Coverage

At the time of this writing, half of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is behind us, and we can begin to look back at what has already been achieved. Since the beginning the Year has been rich in initiatives and events and it has generated a keen interest in public opinion. News of the European Year has reached every corner of Europe and many other places in the world; in January alone we counted over 1300 stories in newspapers and other media; and these have reached as far afield as Bolivia, China and Japan. There have been more than 6000 instances of media coverage so far.

Our official website is also a good indicator; in February alone the website devoted to the Year of Intercultural Dialogue was viewed by 62.000 visitors who opened almost 300 thousand pages. Almost half a million visitors with overall almost 3 million page views is really an encouraging sign. These are respectable numbers which reflect a real yearning in public opinion; it looks like our decision to invest part of the political capital of the EU in intercultural dialogue is being received with an interest among our fellow Europeans.

I believe that the overall success and media presence owes much to the 88 national goodwill ambassadors, 425 national events and 363 project pro-

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files (this includes EU projects, national projects, EU & 3rd country projects and other projects) that have been associated with the European Year.

At this stage, this is already a small, but very clear, sign of success. However, our efforts throughout 2008 are meant to ignite a long-term process. The initiative is designed in such a way that once the European Year is closed, the intercultural networks which will have been established should stay in place and its activities continue. We should use 2008 to launch a broader civic and political process. We hope that the year of intercultural dialogue continues well beyond December 31 and - in time - we hope it helps to build a sustainable political process from the grass roots all the way up to the national leaders. Building on the debate that is being stimulated through the current year, I expect a new political climate to emerge in which intercultural dialogue becomes a natural ingredient in many policy areas. These would include education and policies towards "minorities", of course, but also other fields such as employment, migration, external relations, and the media. Let's make no mistake about it; the European Year is part of a broader and bolder vision for the future of Europe and its place in the international scene. From what I have said it is clear that the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue should not be perceived as just a year but should rather become part of our common, permanent "personal attitude".

6 Close

I would like to conclude these considerations on the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue with a couple of personal reflections. During the last several years we have been concerned by a rise in the number of episodes of intolerance and rejection of the foreigners that have surfaced in several parts of Europe. I thought that a European initiative was needed that would be a positive response to a worrying development in societies. It seemed to me that the conflict fault lines could appear at the interface of some communities divided by different traditions, histories, and systems of values and at times of crises that would endanger local societies. I would like to make this point clear: the perceived cultural differences between communities *per se* are a weak explanation for the rise of episodes of intolerance;

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more often than not, cultural differences merely trigger potentially explosive situations that are fuelled by other socio-economic factors that often are internal to a specific community. It is an unfortunate historical constant that aggression against the "others" - foreigners, minorities, etc. - is used as an attempt to generate a force that glues social groups closer together when unity and stability is threatened by economic or other difficulties.

The second consideration has to do with the surge of immigration from outside the borders of the Union that has marked the past few years. This immigration wave is an effect of the disparities in wealth and life prospects between the north and the south of the world which is one of the true tragedies of our time. Nobody can deny that migration presents genuine challenges for the host societies; for instance, providing for education, health care and social services. But dialogue allows us to meet these challenges head-on. Managing the growing cultural diversity that migrant communities bring is a central topic of debate in many parts of the Union. There are opinion leaders and political figures who try to exploit this debate to gain quick political capital. I am referring to the ones who want to seal the borders, demonise the foreign, and - again - use migrants as scapegoats for the problems, worries and frustrations of their own voters. There are representatives of these views in many parts of the Union. Fortunately, general public opinion is much wiser than these politicians; but their intolerant stance tends to be magnified in the media. So, there is a real danger here. I believe that if we manage to build an adequate climate for intercultural dialogue we would pull the rug out from under the feet of these people, and this would already be a good result.

For this and other reasons, it is worth striving for intercultural dialogue. There is a great deal of work to do in all the constituent elements of intercultural dialogue. Together, we can build a culture of dialogue that will continue to bear fruits well beyond 2008 and that will build a stronger and more vibrant sense of solidarity and responsibility in our society.

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