



Council of the  
European Union

Brussels, 24 September 2024  
(OR. en)

13739/24

CULT 81  
CES 24  
SOC 703  
EMPL 481  
EDUC 372  
ECO 36  
GENDER 226  
COH 57

#### COVER NOTE

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From:	General Secretariat
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Ensuring equal opportunities and social inclusion in access to culture and lifelong learning, and the role of public cultural institutions in the process - <i>Opinion by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)</i>

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Delegations will find attached an EESC exploratory opinion<sup>1</sup> on the above, requested by the Hungarian Presidency and adopted by the EESC plenary on 18 September 2024. The EESC Rapporteur, Mr. Carlos Manuel Trindade, will present it at the Cultural Affairs Committee (CAC) meeting on 30 September 2024. This presentation will be followed by an exchange of views.

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<sup>1</sup> The available language versions of this opinion can be found on the following website: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/ensuring-equal-opportunities-and-social-inclusion-access-culture-lifelong-learning-and-role-public-cultural-institutions>



# OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

## **Ensuring equal opportunities and social inclusion**

Ensuring equal opportunities and social inclusion in access to culture and lifelong learning,  
and the role of public cultural institutions in this process  
(exploratory opinion requested by the Hungarian presidency)

**SOC/809**

Rapporteur: **Carlos Manuel TRINDADE**

Request from the Hungarian  
Presidency of the Council  
Legal basis

Letter, 18/3/2024

Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union  
Exploratory opinion

Section responsible

Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship

Adopted in section

4/9/2024

Adopted at plenary session

18/9/2024

Plenary session No

590

Outcome of vote

(for/against/abstentions)

206/2/4

## 1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC fully endorses the vision and principles enshrined in the Treaty on European Union, where culture, in its various forms, is essential to the development of a social project based on respect for freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It supports the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 and welcomes the opinion on cultural policies approved by the Committee of the Regions in November at its 158th plenary meeting<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.2 The EESC endorses the holistic approach to culture and cultural participation, which aims to incorporate into these concepts the aspect of civic participation, which is key to achieving social objectives such as strengthening social cohesion and democracy. It also recognises that cultural democratisation requires culture to be accessible to everyone, given that it is a public good.
- 1.3 It considers that creative freedom and expression also help strengthen the principles of democracy and tolerance, that they spark reflection and questions, both individually and collectively, and that they fully reject the imposition of dogmas or norms from the outside. People who participate in social and cultural activities are more resilient in times of crisis.
- 1.4 The EESC suggests that the Commission and the Member States adopt public policies that reduce economic and educational inequalities; the latter are key factors that lead to a significant drop in cultural consumption and participation, which are particularly important in rural areas.
- 1.5 The Committee strongly recommends that the European Commission and the Member States consolidate and/or create new programmes aimed at addressing and/or eliminating physical, economic, financial, linguistic and psychological barriers so that all citizens can integrate into communities – especially people suffering from unequal treatment and/or who are victims of discrimination – including through participation in cultural activities.
- 1.6 The EESC proposes to the European Commission that the budgetary strategy of the European Union and the Member States to support public policies for culture in sparsely populated rural areas be adopted as the pillar for the sustainable development of these regions.
- 1.7 The EESC strongly recommends that public investment and critical infrastructure policies targeting rural areas be an integral part of a strategy to revitalise these areas. It concludes that, from an economic viewpoint, public policies help to boost and attract private investment and encourage people to take part in cultural activities in rural areas.
- 1.8 The EESC recommends to the Commission and the Member States that the main objective of cultural policies targeting rural and sparsely populated areas be to increase local communities' participation in decisions, boosting their sense of belonging, democratic participation and social cohesion. Such policies should therefore involve these communities and avoid using approaches that automatically impose measures predefined by central and/or local authorities.
- 1.9 The Committee underlines the importance of public policies for culture in order to:

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<sup>2</sup> OJ C, C/2024/1040, 9.2.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1040/oj>.

- 1.9.1 foster civil dialogue between civil society organisations and central and local authorities in promoting and developing rural areas, and thus for strengthening social and territorial cohesion;
- 1.9.2 speed up or create mechanisms that promote social dialogue, negotiation and collective bargaining in rural areas, as such mechanisms can help boost the economy and living and working conditions, encourage people's democratic participation and help to strengthen communities' resilience.
- 1.10 The EESC recommends the following to the Commission and Member States:
- 1.10.1 school curricula should focus more on cultural and artistic training – one way to foster new creators and new audiences;
- 1.10.2 specialised professionals should be valued, have professional stability and be given incentives to live in rural areas so that, by interacting on an equal basis with local communities, they can help create the conditions needed for cultural policies promoting economic and social development to succeed; and
- 1.10.3 wide-ranging digital, civic and cultural literacy campaigns should be carried out in rural areas as a way to embrace lifelong learning and to defend the values and principles of the European Union, especially by countering disinformation campaigns;
- 1.10.4 for statistics on the cultural sector to be properly updated, collected and processed.
- 1.11 It suggests that a European Year of Rural Areas be created, aimed at raising the profile of the specific features of such areas, particularly their cultural features, and at driving economic development, progress and social cohesion.
- 1.12 The EESC undertakes to assess the need to create, within its structure, a special body where culture will be dealt with in its various dimensions.

## **2. General comments**

- 2.1 The EESC highlights the preamble to the Treaty on European Union<sup>3</sup>, which begins by highlighting the inspiration drawn from the cultural values shared by the various Member States as an important aspect of the European venture.
- 2.2 This common heritage includes the 'values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men

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<sup>3</sup> Treaty on European Union (consolidated version, 2016), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).

prevail<sup>4</sup>, as the founding principles of a community of countries sharing and building a common civilisation project.

- 2.3 Despite the acknowledgement of this common framework, it is in cultural and linguistic diversity that the richness of the EU lies, since interaction strengthens the principles of respect for differences, promoting intercultural dialogue and fighting inequalities.
- 2.4 Combating structural inequality will make a significant contribution to the fight against all kinds of discrimination, in line with the provisions of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union<sup>5</sup>.
- 2.5 The EESC notes that the diverse forms of cultural and artistic expression are recognised as part of social cohesion and of strengthening the EU and thus as a strategic sector of action for the European institutions.
- 2.6 It is in this context that the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026<sup>6</sup> sets out four priority areas for action:
- artists and cultural professionals: empowering the cultural and creative sectors;
  - culture for the people: enhancing cultural participation and the role of culture in society;
  - culture for the planet: unleashing the power of culture; and
  - culture for co-creative partnerships: strengthening the cultural dimension of EU external relations.

### 3. **Specific comments**

#### 3.1 **Culture and freedom**

- 3.1.1 Given the many possible meanings of the word ‘culture’, we need to clarify what it means and how it is to be interpreted in the context of this opinion.
- 3.1.2 The EESC understands culture as a set of creative practices associated with forms of artistic expression. However, this is not limited to what is commonly referred to as high culture (e.g. music, literature, performing arts); it also includes popular expressions of culture such as crafts, fairs, festivals, folklore, gastronomy and heritage, as well as other expressions underpinned by traditions, practices and customs.
- 3.1.3 The concept of participation in cultural activities also includes a variety of active and passive activities such as artistic creation in the strict sense, as well as engaging in the organisation of events of a cultural nature, or simply being a participant<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Treaty on European Union (consolidated version, 2016), Article 2, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).

<sup>5</sup> Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 21, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12016P/TXT>.

<sup>6</sup> Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207(01)).

- 3.1.4 The EESC highlights the idea of ‘cultural democracy’, which involves refusing the ‘minorisation of citizens and audiences that are not considered elite’ and valuing ‘what each one knows, their traditions, their voice’<sup>8</sup>. To achieve this, suitable public policies are needed that prevent cultural discrimination in remote and economically disadvantaged regions.
- 3.1.5 Public policies must be supported by the State budget in order to make programmes aimed at promoting cultural democracy feasible, especially those in the regions mentioned, as this is the only way to provide them with support.
- 3.1.6 The current digital transition brings new opportunities for culture, as it makes new forms of artistic creation possible, and provides new ways of disseminating works and giving access to new audiences. Public and private media play an important role in this context.
- 3.1.7 The EESC notes that current digital tools mean that culture knows no borders. It therefore makes it easier for anti-democratic forces (from Member States or non-EU countries) to subvert and manipulate concepts of popular culture by using them for propaganda and for poisoning public opinion and turning it against the founding values of the European Union. In this context, public awareness and resistance to propaganda needs to be promoted.
- 3.1.8 Traditional sports and games are also factors for civic participation and social integration, and reinforce the sense of belonging to communities. According to UNESCO, safeguarding and promoting traditional sports and games (TSG) builds temporal and cultural paths leading to intercultural and intercommunity dialogues. TSG promote the understanding of contemporary cultural, societal, and sports practices and anticipate their future evolutions. TSG give governments, communities, and individuals the chance to express both cultural pride and richness<sup>9</sup>.

## 3.2 Culture and citizenship

- 3.2.1 The EESC supports acknowledgement of the role that cultural participation plays in strategies to combat all forms of exclusion. Cultural activities provide somewhere for communities to engage in social contacts and help to create spaces for inclusion, in particular allowing people to express individual and collective minority identities. Thus, they start to feel part of a wider community.
- 3.2.2 Citizens engaged within their communities, in particular by boosting cultural activities linked to their linguistic and cultural traditions or specificities, are more resilient in times of crisis as they are anchored in the sense of belonging to community.

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, Culture and Democracy: the evidence, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/07370fba-110d-11ee-b12e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

<sup>8</sup> Porto Santo Charter – Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship (2021).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.unesco.org/en/sport-and-anti-doping/traditional-sports-and-games>.

- 3.2.3 The differences in impact observed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic constitute one example of this. The most active communities with higher levels of citizen engagement showed much greater compliance with measures to protect against and combat the pandemic<sup>10</sup>.
- 3.2.4 The EESC draws attention to studies carried out in various countries that have shown a link between cultural consumption habits and violence. For example, the study *Knocking on Hell's door: dismantling hate with cultural consumption*, conducted in Italy in 2022, concluded that an increase of 1% in cultural consumption translates into a 20% reduction in hate crimes<sup>11</sup>.
- 3.2.5 Encouraging the integration of citizens into artistic creation projects helps to break social barriers, be they class, ethnic, generational, religious and gender barriers. Moreover, in the case of people with disabilities, participation in a cultural community means that the stereotypes that they and others might have about the differences evolve, and ultimately holds less importance.
- 3.2.6 The evidence is that taking part in cultural activities, whether passively or actively, helps to improve wellbeing and mental and physical health<sup>12</sup>.
- 3.2.7 This demonstrates that cultural activities help to maintain united communities and have a positive impact on the attitudes and behaviours of the people that belong to them when it comes to democracy and civic action<sup>13</sup>.

### 3.3 Culture, inequalities and discrimination

- 3.3.1 The EESC has observed that structural inequalities persist in access to cultural participation.
- 3.3.2 These are primarily socio-economic. People with higher educational and income levels are more likely to participate in cultural activities.
- 3.3.3 Commission figures<sup>14</sup> show that people with higher education are 20% more likely to take part in cultural activities than those who have just completed secondary school.
- 3.3.4 A comparison based on income reveals that around 80% of citizens belonging to the higher income bracket participate in cultural activities, while this figure is half (40%) for those in the lower income bracket.
- 3.3.5 All of these inequalities are more pronounced in peripheral, rural and sparsely populated areas.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/docs/voices-of-culture/voices-of-culture-brainstorming-report-youth-mental-health-culture-2022\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/docs/voices-of-culture/voices-of-culture-brainstorming-report-youth-mental-health-culture-2022_en.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, Culture and Democracy: the evidence, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/70fba-110d-11ee-b12e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

<sup>12</sup> E. Grossi et al., 'The interaction between culture, health, and psychological wellbeing: Data mining from the Italian Culture and Well-being Project', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 13 (I): pp. 129-148, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, Culture and Democracy: the evidence, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/70fba-110d-11ee-b12e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, Culture and Democracy: the evidence, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/70fba-110d-11ee-b12e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.



3.3.6 The EESC stresses that factors such as disability, ethnic origin, gender, age and migrant or refugee status also reduce the likelihood of accessing cultural activities, either actively or passively.

3.3.7 All of these factors are potential causes of discrimination. European and Member State public policies are a crucial tool in combating this situation. Therefore, the relevant budgetary support should take this strategy into account.

#### **3.4 Culture and regional asymmetries**

3.4.1 The EESC highlights the fact that rural communities make up 83% of the EU's territory; it is estimated that 137 million Europeans live in these areas – around 30% of the population. The population in these regions is gradually declining. The reduction in public services and economic activities, as well as the inaccessibility of digital services, is making access to culture and participation in cultural events increasingly difficult.

3.4.2 The regional and territorial asymmetries that exist in each of the Member States are particularly detrimental, including in access to cultural facilities. The EESC warns that regional inequalities in access to cultural activities tend to encourage other types of inequality, particularly in terms of civic participation.

3.4.3 One example of such asymmetries is the average distance that people need to travel to go to the cinema – in cities, it is about 3 km, in rural areas it is six times higher – up to 18 km. The EESC notes that only public policies for the promotion and dissemination of culture make a decisive contribution to reducing these asymmetries.

3.4.4 The European Committee of the Regions has issued an opinion<sup>15</sup> highlighting the potential of cultural activities in the development of rural areas. This opinion 'underscores that rural culture plays an important role in maintaining and managing cultural landscapes, biodiversity and traditional values, and that some rural areas with high natural values form specific biocultural areas where the environment and the local economy coexist in a sustainable way, as embedded in the culture and tradition of these communities'.

3.4.5 The EESC points out that regional asymmetries in access to cultural activities tend to lead to inequalities, especially at the level of civic participation.

3.4.6 Some of the European Union's rural regions are areas with a high proportion of migrant labour; strategies to promote cultural activities help to build bridges that eliminate prejudices and stereotypes between communities, promoting intercultural relations and, thus, social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

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<sup>15</sup> OJ C, C/2024/1040, 9.2.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1040/oj>.

- 3.4.7 Areas with low population density tend to be more isolated and have a monolithic culture. Their cultural and linguistic specificities and traditions must be respected and boosted, specifically by promoting sharing activities with individuals from other regions.
- 3.4.8 With regard to regional asymmetries, the EESC refers to the Porto Santo Charter<sup>16</sup>, a document that was drawn up following the conference held in this particular outermost region, and which ‘advocates for the creation of conditions for a more active cultural participation and the recognition of the cultural practices of different social groups’.
- 3.4.9 The Charter states that cultural democracy ‘does not “bring culture” into a territory, because culture already exists in every territory: it values local culture and complements other cultural expressions, opening up local experience to the universal, and stimulating this dialogue’<sup>17</sup>.
- 3.4.10 This Charter underscores the need to empower and involve people as ‘active cultural subjects’ by facilitating ‘access to the means of cultural creation’ and the democratisation of ‘decision-making processes’<sup>18</sup>.
- 3.4.11 The ultimate goal is to guarantee plurality, not just in access to culture but also in its production and dissemination, favouring ‘pluralisation, the territorialisation of decisions and the sharing of power’<sup>19</sup>.

### **3.5 Culture and economics**

- 3.5.1 The EESC emphasises that, in promoting popular culture, traditions and celebrations, cultural activities in rural areas play an economic role that needs media coverage, promotion among urban communities and greater financial support.
- 3.5.2 Culture in rural areas promotes entrepreneurship and the creation of micro, small and medium-sized businesses. These businesses focus their economic activity on the production of goods and services and the creation of events. Activities linked to gastronomy, crafts, regional products, rural tourism, leisure activities, fairs and festivals, are an example of this.
- 3.5.3 The EESC points out that the role of culture in the economic development of rural and sparsely populated areas is a strategic one. In the context of the circular economy, culture could be both the cause and effect of a holistic process where it acts as a driver for economic growth and benefits from the impact that this growth has within communities.
- 3.5.4 Specifically, this process encourages people to remain in their local areas, especially young people.

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<sup>16</sup> Porto Santo Charter – Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship (2021).

<sup>17</sup> Porto Santo Charter – Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship (2021).

<sup>18</sup> Porto Santo Charter – Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship (2021).

<sup>19</sup> Porto Santo Charter – Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship (2021).

### 3.6 Culture, education, qualifications and learning

- 3.6.1 The EESC maintains that school curricula focused on technical skills tend to focus less on the creative and artistic abilities of children and young people, a situation that needs to change.
- 3.6.2 Involving and promoting professionals specialising in artistic creation, production and management who boost existing cultural infrastructure, in particular libraries and social and community centres, are key to creating a community dynamic in cultural production.
- 3.6.3 The EESC points out that local and regional actors should be involved in identifying the needs of specialised professionals and of lifelong learning, in order to adapt 'actions to the needs and requirements of rural areas, with particular regard to those that are depopulated or facing demographic or environmental related risks'<sup>20</sup>.
- 3.6.4 Lifelong learning tends to adapt to market needs; however, people's right to learning must be duly considered. Cultural activities also constitute non-formal learning that promotes individuals' self-esteem, quality of life and personal development.
- 3.6.5 Changes to the social ecosystem create learning needs in the areas of digital, civic and cultural literacy. The learning gap is even more pronounced in rural areas. Literacy has an impact on all parts of social life – from developing people's sense of belonging to a community to combating propaganda and efforts to poison public opinion.
- 3.6.6 Digitisation of societies presents a challenge and could trigger a new type of exclusion, which is more prominent in rural areas. Investment in digital infrastructure and digital literacy is crucial in order to avoid creating a new way of alienating people with fewer digital skills from cultural goods.
- 3.6.7 The EESC, as already mentioned, believes that culture is a factor that contributes to the education of more engaged, more tolerant citizens, boosting civic and democratic competences, in urban as well as rural areas.

### 3.7 Culture and infrastructure

- 3.7.1 The EESC points out that infrastructure is fundamental to the promotion of cultural activities. Libraries, sports halls and schools, especially in rural areas, are public goods with the potential to be multifunctional and that can encourage the development of cultural initiatives.
- 3.7.2 According to the *Libraries on the European Agenda* report<sup>21</sup>, there are over 65 000 libraries in the EU and over 100 million people visit them every year. Such public facilities are able to promote community involvement (active or passive) and lifelong learning - serving as an

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<sup>20</sup> OJ C, C/2024/1040, 9.2.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1040/oj>.

<sup>21</sup> Kish, I., Thominet, H., Zignani T. (EU Public Libraries 2030), *Libraries on the European Agenda – How can the EU leverage the potential of public libraries to tackle European challenges?*

interface between citizens and other cultural institutions - along with commitment to the values of democracy.

- 3.7.3 Public libraries are a fundamental cultural resource for local communities and can help to combat social and economic inequalities, making culture accessible to all. This means, however, that they need funding and adequate resources, as well as qualified staff with decent salaries and working conditions.
- 3.7.4 The EESC highlights the fact that, in rural areas, in addition to the importance of infrastructure in supporting cultural activities, the availability of public facilities is even more crucial, particularly transport, health services, energy, communications, education, water and sanitation facilities, in order to ensure that people stay in these areas and to guarantee generational renewal.
- 3.7.5 All of these public facilities are complementary, but also pertinent for sustainable development and promoting social cohesion and democracy.

### **3.8 Culture, public policies and civil society**

- 3.8.1 The EESC stresses that public policies devised by central and local authorities are crucial when it comes to shaping development strategies for rural areas.
- 3.8.2 Of these, cultural policies constitute one of the cornerstones of relations with local communities, since they encourage community engagement and promote and amplify popular culture.
- 3.8.3 The EESC underlines that civil society organisations, in their various different forms, plus trade unions, play an important role in this process, given that they provide a forum for communities to engage in social contacts, and are key representatives who, through civil dialogue, provide an interface between political authorities and communities.
- 3.8.4 The EESC underlines that the promotion of decent working conditions in rural areas is another factor that contributes strongly to encouraging people, particularly young people, to remain in these areas, and to attracting new inhabitants. A culture of social dialogue, negotiation and collective bargaining between the social partners constitutes significant added value for these regions.

## **4. The EESC and culture**

- 4.1 Sociocultural diversity and the plurality of expression among people in a democracy prompts the EESC to pay greater attention to the cultural sector, in the holistic sense of the term, especially given its role in promoting the founding values of the European Union.
- 4.2 The EESC recognises the lack of an internal body to promote systematic efforts to monitor, study and submit proposals on the cultural sector.

- 4.3 The aim of such a body would be to assess the implications of public policies for the cultural sector at European Union and Member State level, and the contribution of this sector to the European venture, to economic, social and territorial cohesion, to the promotion of democracy and to the fight against all forms of disinformation.

Brussels, 18 September 2024.

*The President of the European Economic and Social Committee*

Oliver RÖPKE

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