DISINFORMATION, SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AND COVID-19

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Trust and social capital have long been declining in Europe and the US, and fake news and disinformation have accentuated these dangerous trends, thus enhancing our collective vulnerabilities. Social media platforms and new technologies have lowered geographical divides, and yet they also contributed to social polarization in local communities and the cheap and easy use of disinformation to persuade the public.

Societal resilience, the collective ability to recover from a crisis, is being put to the test harder than ever before. It is more important than ever to understand the interdependencies between current and older threats and the best ways to diagnose them and effectively counter them in our societies today.

The primary data presented in this report was collected through a representative population survey applied in Romania, in December 2021 by Reveal Marketing Research, as part of the „Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures“ project.

As part of the project „Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures“, we explore societal resilience in Romania by means of a representative population survey applied in Romania, in December 2021 by Reveal Marketing Research. The total number of respondents was 2216, with an equal distribution across all Romanian counties, as well as gender and age balanced.

This project was funded by the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, following the common application by Aspen Institute Romania and Eurocomunicare Association to the 2021 call for proposals on Increasing Societal Resilience.

Key results: 3D Threat Matrix: Disinformation, Dilettantism, Distrust

STAGE 1: (DIS)INFORMATION RECEPTION

Romanian’s media diet easily exposes them to disinformation. Despite having a relatively low trust in information from social media sources, Romanians are nevertheless still using Facebook as the most frequent source of information, accessing it daily. The issue with excessive reliance on social media is that it increases permeability to low credibility sources and misleading information.

STAGE 2: (DIS)INFORMATION PROCESSING

Assessing the credibility of information sources is a valuable skill for countering disinformation. We explored the fact checking habits of the survey participants, in order to gauge their ability to distinguish between reliable and misleading information. The preferred course of action is to rely on personal experience. There is a growing threat of dilettantism, with higher reliance for receiving information from family and friends rather than experts.

Often, the reception of information depends on the beliefs and conceptual framing of each person. In the Romanian case, we find a much higher support for conservative policy items, such as the traditional family, social protection, patriotism or religion. In contrast, much lower acceptance is manifested towards abortion and other progressive policies. The values profile of Romanians can influence the permeability to disinformation, as it leads people towards certain information sources of an “echo chambers” type (found on social media and on mainstream media, too).
STAGE 3: (DIS)INFORMATION DISEMINATION

Reactions and actions based on information input are very low in Romania overall. Most often, Romanians react to the information they gather or receive by sending information via direct messaging, or via social media platforms.

In terms of the narratives that circulated in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of conspiracy theories gained momentum, in principal unsubstantiated claims reflecting an ultra-nationalistic, ultra-conservative view of the world: Romanians’ national identity is constantly threatened, Romania is a colony of the EU, and the West is decadent, promoting questionable sexual practices. A number of COVID-19 related conspiracy theories and false claims are also supported by respondents, indicating low inoculation against them.

Policy Recommendations

**Key Vulnerability: Disinformation → Proposed Actions: Transparency and Data**

**Key Vulnerability: Dilettantism → Proposed Actions: Education & Accountability**

**Key Vulnerability: Distrust → Proposed Actions: Truth, Solidarity, Quality of Governance**

**Current Context**

Europe and America have long faced the threat of disinformation and had to resist its impact in their societies. Trust and social capital have long been declining. But fake news and disinformation have accentuated these dangerous trends, thus enhancing our collective vulnerabilities.

Social media platforms and new technologies have arguably lowered geographical divides, yet they have also contributed to social and political polarization in local communities. Disinformation can easily and cheaply be used to persuade the public at an accelerated and dangerous pace as social media can be used to share false or misleading information.

The COVID-19 pandemic made things more stringent than ever before, as national vaccination campaigns have been countered by state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. Feelings of fear or sadness in the population are explored maliciously to seed skepticism and animosity within the public and between citizens and their elected officials.

Societal resilience is thus put to the test harder than ever before. It is more important than ever to understand the interdependencies between current and older threats and the best ways to diagnose them and effectively counter them in our societies today.

Societal resilience is the collective ability to recover from a crisis. However, while traditional definitions of resilience focus on the extent to which a society can "bounce-back" to its pre-crisis status, we are made increasingly more aware that going back to what was the norm is no longer possible.
as too much has already changed. Given the wide vulnerabilities we already had in the face of disinformation and fake news, bouncing back might not even be desirable. As such, societal resilience must deal with the capacity to recover and adapt in the face of overlapping crises.

Disinformation is false or misleading information, intentionally created or strategically amplified to mislead for a purpose (e.g., political, geopolitical, financial, or social gain), while misinformation is false or misleading information that is not necessarily intentional. Recently, the European Commission, whose approach initially focused exclusively on orchestrated disinformation campaigns, has expanded its countermeasures to particular instances of misinformation. “The ‘infodemic’ around the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that misinformation [...] can also pose substantial public harm if it becomes viral. While the main target remains disinformation in the narrow sense, in the strengthened Code signatories should commit to have in place appropriate policies and take proportionate actions to mitigate the risks posed by misinformation, when there is a significant public harm dimension and with proper safeguards for the freedom of speech.”

The infodemic surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the soundness and resilience of numerous societies and, unfortunately, some countries in CEE showed a high permeability to misleading narratives and disinformation about COVID-19. The consequences are well-documented: low vaccination rates, limited compliance to the prevention measures, and anti-mask protests.

The continuous escalation of the Ukraine crisis is coupled with a wave of disinformation aimed at increasing confusion and amplifying dissensions. Furthermore, the vulnerabilities of the CEE region (e.g. an ambivalence towards the West, populist communication, low trust, fragmented media ecosystem, etc.) are continuously being exploited to make a unified reaction more difficult.

It is expected that in this context of overlapping crises, resilience to disinformation will be put to new, tougher tests.

**Enabling Conditions – Trust and Institutional Quality**

COVID-19 has had a measurable impact on the overall consumption of news in the world. It brought people once again to traditional media such as TV and Radio, where official governmental updates were communicated daily concerning the pandemic. Experts were interviewed in traditional media outlets. However, there was equally a wide variety of unsubstantiated information and grey literature found its way to the population via social media platforms, and peer-to-peer dissemination. The confusion and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic made people both hungrier for information and more permeable to disinformation.

Since 2020, general trust increased worldwide in all sources of general news (see Figure 1). Social media enjoy a relatively low level of trust in general, and increasingly less people look to this digital environment for reliable information or news. Although trust in information shared on social media is lower than information shared on the radio or news websites according to the Global Web Index, it is higher than the word of mouth from friends and family and higher compared with the trust in foreign government websites.

However, the most noticeable trend is the regain of the first rank of public trust of the search engines sources. In a context in which growing regulatory instruments aim to protect digital consumers of information from targeted content, search engines appear to be ever more neutral environments. However, neutrality does not necessarily mean quality. The online search tactic of accessing information leaves the population trapped in their own con-
ceptual bubble: searching for information on what they already know.

Figure 1. Most trusted sources of general news and information worldwide (2011 - 2021)

[Graph showing trends in trusted sources]

Source: Statista

In the specific case study of Romania, an early survey after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that over 70% of Romanians were watching the news (irrespective of their source) more or much more than usual\textsuperscript{13}.

Based on existent survey data, we are thus able to map the relative usage of different online and offline news sources both at global and at national level. Several blind spots remain, however. We have a much poorer understanding of the growing share of peer-to-peer information dissemination via messaging (e.g., WhatsApp) or emails. In Romania, instant messaging platforms are not widely used for news according to recent data\textsuperscript{14}, but the overall usage of approximately 10% has the potential to grow.

Emerging new video content platforms such as Tik Tok are also much harder to map, making the implementation of fact-checking efforts much more difficult. There is overall a relative mismatch between the channels through which disinformation hits our societies and the defensive skills journalists, NGOs and academics poses in the face of the “information disorder”—the broad societal challenges associated with misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation\textsuperscript{15}.

For the Romanian context, it is important to understand the permeability of information based on its source. The extent to which people are open to more trustworthy sources of information, such as official statistics or institutional websites can impact positively to a large extent the resilience to disinformation.

Based on the original survey data deployed within the project „Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures“, we can see that in Romania traditional media, such as TV or Radio are more trusted than social media platforms. The most trusted sources of information are official statistics and specialized websites, which would create a lower vulnerability to disinformation (see Figure 2).

The extent to which people are open to more trustworthy sources of information can impact positively resilience to disinformation.
However, an equally important source of information for Romanians is the word of mouth from family and friends, which makes for a very high vulnerability to disinformation. Relying on persons you know, and you trust for sources of information is linked to the demise of the role of experts in the public space. As such, an increasing dilettantism emerges across the world, with lower reliance on experts as sources of validated, reliable information.

Figure 2. Trust in Sources of Information in Romania (0=low, 10=high)

In terms of trust in public institutions, Romanians remain over the years highly trustworthy of the Army and the Church (see Figure 3). Mass-media enjoy only an average level of trust in Romania, while official institutions such as the Parliament, the Presidency and political parties have the lowest scores in the public trust.

An important place in terms of public trust is however also occupied by the civil society. This is key to the implementation of many bottom-up initiatives for countering disinformation in Romania. It is also the sector that can build strong capabilities in support of civic engagement and social capital. Civic engagement is a key element of democratic resilience. It has many forms: from civic duties such as voting or participating in political forums to monitoring the activity of public institutions, developing projects and activities to the benefit of society, or advocating for certain policy issues. By working together to solve the problems in their communities, people develop a higher sense of trust in each other. Given the high prevalence of information distribution through word of mouth from friends and family, raising awareness in local communities on the perils of disinformation can be very effective.
Prior studies confirm that disinformation affects trust in both the media and national institutions. There is evidence that exposure to a conspiracy claim has powerful negative effects on trust in government services, and institutions. The belief in conspiracy theories erodes trust in epistemic authorities, and limits the willingness to engage in behaviours that have a positive impact on the community, such as vaccination.

Furthermore, extant research indicates that the belief in conspiracy theories is negatively correlated with trust in traditional media sources (TV, radio, newspapers), and positively correlated with trust in the information received via social media or by word of mouth. There are two possible explanations for the latter relationship: 1. The fact that conspiracy theories are usually diffused “below the radar”, on social media platforms and private messaging apps, and 2. That belief in conspiracy theories is reinforced in interpersonal discussions.

Beyond trust in sources (see Figure 2) of information and trust in institutions (see Figure 3), the project “Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures” also covered the level of satisfaction amongst respondents with the outputs of the governance process in Romania. Figure 4 below shows an overall level of disenchantment with the functioning of the Romanian Government over the past year. The quality of democracy or the extent to which Rule of Law is uphold in Romania are also scoring below average. The highest level of satisfaction amongst respondents is connected to their own financial situation.
Figure 4. Relative Satisfaction with Governance Outputs in Romania (0=low, 10=high)

How satisfied are you with:

- Your own financial situation
- Rule of Law
- Activity of your local government
- Functioning of democracy in Romania
- Activity of the Romanian Government

Source: NATO PDD Survey, December 2021

3D Threat Matrix: Disinformation, Dilettantism, Distrust

There are three stages in which a person engages with the news and other information nowadays. Each of these stages has different challenges from the point of view of the disinformation threat:

- The first stage is information input—from what sources do people receive their information. At this stage, quality and reliability of information sources are important.

- The second stage is information processing—how do people check the information they receive. At this stage, the fact-checking process by both individuals and civil society organisations can play an important role. However, for this stage of the processing of information, group dynamics, personal beliefs and values or personal experience can also play a major role.

- The third stage is information dissemination—how people share and spread the news/content in general. At this stage official communication, and measure to mitigate the artificial amplification of fake content can play a large role in countering peer-to-peer transmission of disinformation.

Across all stages, distrust in public institutions and official sources of information, as well as overly reliance on own expertise or that of family and friends can have amplification effects in a person’s or society’s permeability to disinformation. Therefore, there is a 3D matrix of threat in the “information disorder”: disinformation, dilettantism, and distrust.
STAGE 1: (DIS)INFORMATION RECESSION

Despite having a relatively low trust in information from social media sources (see Figure 2), Romanians are nevertheless still using Facebook as the most frequent source of information, accessing it daily (see Figure 5). A similar frequent source of information is the TV—used several times a week, while newspapers are only consulted once a week on average in Romania.

Prior research at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic showed similar patterns of media consumption, where social media are the most accessed information source on the daily basis, followed by legacy media (TV, radio, print).

The issue with excessive reliance on social media is that it increases permeability to low credibility sources and misleading information. In the case of COVID-19 vaccination, vaccine resistant individuals consumed significantly less information about COVID-19 from more quality sources (newspapers, television, radio, and government agencies, and significantly more information from social media than vaccine acceptant individuals. People that actively search for information and have a diverse media diet are more likely to be associated with the online encouragement of vaccination.
STAGE 2: (DIS)INFORMATION PROCESSING

There is a growing threat of dilettantism, with higher reliance for receiving information from family and friends rather than experts.

There are healthy ways to engage with new information, such as lateral reading\(^2\) and fact-checking practices. Assessing the credibility of information sources is a valuable skill for countering disinformation, one that is put at the forefront of media and literacy education\(^2\). Safe and efficient practices of fact-checking include: evaluating the credibility of the source, checking for biases, comparing to other trustworthy sources, verifying claims, look for an emotional tone and bad grammar, distinguish between primary and secondary sources\(^2\).

The project “Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures” explored the fact checking habits of the survey participants, in order to gauge their ability to distinguish between reliable and misleading information.

As shown in Figure 6, the preferred course of action is to rely on personal experience. Other concerning practices that have been frequently reported in the survey are to check with friends and family, and to check what opinion leaders have to say (which is questionable, as opinion leaders are not necessarily experts in the field they comment upon).

In conclusion, Romanian citizens report a variety of fact-checking practices, some of which place them at a higher risk of exposure to misleading, low-credibility information. There is a growing threat of dilettantism, with higher reliance for receiving information from family and friends rather than experts.

Figure 6. Fact-checking activities (0=never, 10=always)

![Fact-checking activities chart](image)

Source: NATO PDD Survey, December 2021
There is little indication that respondents perceive themselves as captive in closed online communities (echo-chambers), in which their views and values would remain unchallenged. Respondents report a relatively frequent experience of reading or hearing information with which they do not agree (Figure 7). Consequently, many engage in various efforts to verify the information they receive, most often through an attempt to verify the information from one additional source, sometimes even multiple sources. Additionally, respondents turn to traditional media for further clarification. This is a healthy way of engaging with information that one does not agree with, instead of simply dismissing it or delegitimizing it from the very beginning.

Figure 7. Uncertainty Regarding Online Information (How often do you? 0=never, 10=always)

![Graph showing checking online information](image)

Source: NATO PDD Survey, December 2021

Often, the reception of information depends on the beliefs and conceptual framing of each person. A real help in understanding the active role that the receiver plays (the audience if we refer to mass communication) is the distinction made by the French scholar Jean-Noel Kapferer\(^26\). Persuasion, as the author points out, is actually self-persuasion\(^27\). In his view, the acceptance or refusal of a persuasive message depend on the particular interests or beliefs of the receiver.

For example, political ideology plays a significant role in the spread of disinformation. When presented with identical information, individuals with opposing political attitudes grow firmer in their original convictions and are less prone to consensus and compromise\(^28\). In general, people actively seek and support information that confirms their prior beliefs and view of the world – a cognitive bias called confirmation bias\(^29\). In terms of political preferences, in the US, fake news is more compelling to conservatives than liberals\(^30\).

In the Romanian case, we tested this conceptual basis on which information is received with a set of standard issues that reflect the conservative vs progressive policy preferences. We find a much higher support for conservative policy items, such as the traditional family, social protection, patriotism, or religion (see Figure 8). In contrast, much lower acceptance is manifested towards abortion and other progressive policies. There is a large difference in Romania between the average support for conservative policies versus the average support for progressive issues.
Looking at the online petitions circulating in Romania over the past years, an important vector of mobilization is provided by both conservative (e.g., opposing mandatory vaccination) and progressive causes (e.g., enforcing animal rights). There are subnational variations in terms of the profile of average signatures in support of either progressive or conservative causes (see Figure 9).

The values profile of Romanians can influence the permeability to disinformation, as it leads people towards certain sources of information and traps them into echo chambers (both on social media and increasingly on mainstream media, too).

Source: authors compilation based on data from www.petitieonline.com
STAGE 3: (DIS)INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

Reactions and actions based on information input are very low in Romania overall (see Figure 10). Most often, Romanians react to the information they gather or receive by sending information via direct messaging, or social media platforms. Respondents have only seldomly committed to further actions based on the information they received, such as civic engagement or online debates.

Figure 10. Acting Upon Information (Over the past year, how often did you? 0=never, 10=very frequent)

![Graph showing information dissemination actions](source)

Source: NATO PDD Survey, December 2021

A very large share of Romanians has had a personal or direct experience with COVID-19. Three quarters of the respondents in the survey of project „Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures”, declare that either themselves or family, friends and acquaintances have been infected with COVID-19 (see Figure 11). Only a quarter of the respondents have had no experience at all with the disease during the first two years of the pandemic in Romania.

Figure 11. Respondents’ experience with COVID-19 over the past year

![Pie chart showing COVID-19 experience](source)

Source: NATO PDD Survey, December 2021
In terms of the actions taken by Romanians in the COVID-19 context, survey data show a much higher importance of communicating the risks of being infected with COVID-19 to family and friends (Figure 12). This is essentially a dissemination process of information, as people would normally share information they received in the first place themselves. In this sense, the quality of the sources of information, the transparency of public officials and public communication play a major part in ensuring that the dissemination process does not spread disinformation and misleading narratives. Only 60 per cent of respondents believed it is important to get vaccinated in Romania, which is a little over the actual national vaccination rate for adult population in Romania at the date of the survey (approximately 50%).

**Figure 12. Respondents’ actions in the COVID-19 context**

How important do you think it is to:

- Explain to friends and family the risks of being infected
- Get vaccinated
- Inform friends and family about official sources of...
- Have telemedicine or online learning
- Do the shopping for family and friends
- Encourage others to get vaccinated
- Work remotely
- Encourage family and friends to remain isolated
- Encourage family and friends to buy provisions

Source: NATO PDD Survey, December 2021

**Misleading narratives and conspiracy theories have a high permeability in Romania, especially claims reflecting a nationalistic, conservative worldview.**

In terms of the narratives that circulated in Romania in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of conspiracy theories gained momentum. As the data gathered in the „Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures” project indicate, misleading narratives and conspiracy theories have a high permeability in Romania (Figure 13). By far, the most popular narrative is that Romania was accepted in the EU solely for its cheap labour force, cheap primary resources and access to the market (on average, 6.8 points out of 7). This claim is perceived as equally trustworthy as the true claim on vaccine efficiency that we used as a baseline. Other unsubstantiated claims reflecting an ultranationalistic, and ultra-nationalistic view of the world are that Romanians’ national identity is constantly and deliberately threatened, that Romania is a colony of the EU, and the West is decadent, promoting questionable sexual practices. A number of COVID-19 related conspiracy theories and false claims are also supported by the respondents, indicating low inoculation against them.
It is noteworthy that, in general, mis- and disinformation narratives regarding global issues (e.g. the pandemic) tend to be interconnected across countries, regions, and even continents, and to follow similar contagion means (private messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, Facebook accounts, public pages, blogs, sites and TV channels)31. Misleading narratives are global in terms of content, and local, even personalized in terms of addressability and circulation. In this vein, we would like to highlight that the aforementioned misleading narratives and conspiracy theories popular among Romanian citizens are in line with the huge volume of contradictory/misleading information about the COVID-19 pandemic circulating across the globe.

**Survey Methodology**

The primary data presented in this report were collected through a representative population survey applied in Romania, in December 2021 by Reveal Marketing Research, as part of the „Tackling Disinformation Resilience in Romania: mapping the risks, and implementing innovative mitigation measures” project. The total number of respondents was 2216, with an equal distribution across all Romanian counties, as well as gender and age balanced (see Figure 14). The survey was applied online.
Policy Recommendations

Key Vulnerability: Disinformation —→ Proposed Actions: Transparency and Data

Key Stakeholder: International Organisations (IOs)
The international community, EU institutions, and member-state governments should support the development and implementation of new metrics of societal resilience that accurately reflect domestic and local vulnerabilities to disinformation. This can further evidence-based policymaking and enable national and subnational crisis-response, developing resilience measures tailored to the specific vulnerabilities in our communities.

Key Stakeholder: National Authorities
Public institutions should make comprehensive datasets widely available to the public. In the Romanian context, it is often academia, NGOs and journalists that deliver a compensatory function of creating widely accessible, comprehensive, and up-to-date platforms of public data. Greater efforts from government institutions should be made to integrate sectorial data and deliver a clearer perspective on the impact of governmental measures. This was especially important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when such key data on incidence were important for structuring public and private activities. However, irrespective of the context, wide transparency on public data and public decisions can diminish the permeability to fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. This open communication process must be consolidated over time and with substantial commitments for continuity on the part of public authorities.
Key Stakeholder: Academics, NGOs, think-tanks and Journalists

There are, however, many aspects on which third parties must still take the lead. As such, researchers, experts, and journalists should also continue to study the available data and communicate their independent findings to the public. It is often up to civil society and academia to develop new tools and measurements for societal resilience and the spread of disinformation.

Key Vulnerability: Dilettantism  ➔ Proposed Actions: Education and Accountability

Key Stakeholder: IOs

International organisations should do more to communicate across all levels of the public with regards to major issues. Many times, EU or NATO are brought to the front of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. However, IOs tend to communicate within a higher institutional level, while disinformation campaigns take root at societal level, often in local communities.

A wide range of local workshops, events and educational campaigns should raise the awareness amongst younger generations or rural areas. Furthermore, better accountability mechanisms should be developed with the support of IOs in the field of public data and decision-making transparency.

Finally, networks of accessible expert communication should be developed at national and local level, in partnership with local stakeholders, opinion leaders and figures enjoying prestige and credibility.

Key Stakeholder: National Authorities, NGOs, think tanks and Academia

National authorities, in partnership with NGOs and members of academia should develop interventions that can reduce the worst harms of mis- and disinformation, such as threats to public health, democratic participation, international peace and targeting of communities through hate speech and extremism.

Media literacy interventions have a proven efficacy in building resilience to disinformation. Academics and specialized NGOs must step up efforts to implement educational interventions to enhance critical thinking and digital literacy, targeting audiences of different age groups. A particular emphasis should be placed on underprivileged groups, who are often strategically targeted by disinformation actors.

Educational policies should approach media literacy as a critical thinking and life skill that equips the audience with the right set of competences needed to produce independent judgments about media content, including social media content.

Key Vulnerability: Distrust  ➔ Proposed Actions: Truth, Solidarity, Quality of Governance

Key Stakeholder: National Authorities

Out of all the structural factors that affect resilience to online disinformation, those related to trust are the hardest to tackle. In general, disinformation builds upon pre-existing divisions and discontent in a society, instead of triggering them from scratch through communication actions. These pre-existing sources of distrust usually have historic, real-life roots and cannot be countered exclusively through discursive means.

Consequently, National Authorities should invest more into researching, mapping, and understanding the sources of discontent for their citizens, and at the same time, engage with disinformation that attempts to take advantage of and amplify pro-social public attitudes.

The design and implementation of a National Strategy for Countering disinformation, coupled with the creation of a dedicated agency structure (inter-institutional) that complies with high levels of transparency and professionalism would be a key step for increasing the quality of governance.
Key Stakeholder: Academia

Academia should conduct more research on trust-building measures, including those that create awareness as to the role that access to reliable facts and content play in public conversations.

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