



## **CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**

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### **BURNING ISSUE**

#### **Istanbul convention: Poland moves a step closer to quitting domestic violence treaty**

Human rights groups have raised the alarm after the Polish parliament moved a step closer to withdrawing the country from the Istanbul Convention. The 2011 treaty, signed by 45 countries and the European Union, requires governments to adopt legislation prosecuting domestic violence and other forms of abuse against women.

The Polish parliament voted to send a bill called "Yes to Family, No to Gender" to parliamentary committees for examination.

The text calls on the eastern European country to withdraw from the Istanbul Treaty. It comes after Turkey withdrew from the treaty earlier this month, sparking international condemnation and nationwide protests.

The right-wing Polish government had announced its intention to withdraw from the treaty last summer, claiming it did not respect religion and promoted controversial ideologies about gender.

"Parliament can and should still reject the dangerous bill, ensure protection from violence for all women and girl," said Hillary Margolis, a women's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch.

Irene Donadio, Senior Lead, Strategy and Partnership at International Planned Parenthood Federation-European Network (IPPF-EN), told Euronews the move was "very worrying".

"We are extremely, extremely concerned about the developments in Poland. We think that is a serious threat, that the protection from domestic violence and violence against women will be dismantled," Donadio said. "We also watch with apprehension the attempt to replace the Istanbul Convention with another convention on family rights."

According to government documents leaked to the [Balkan Investigative Reporting Network \(BIRN\)](#), authorities will seek to replace the convention with a new treaty that would ban same-sex marriage and abortions. (...)

Source: [Euronews.com](#)

## REGIONAL UPDATES

### **Moscow Court Refuses To Remove Domestic Violence NGO From 'Foreign Agent' Registry**

A court in Moscow has refused to remove Nasiliyu.net, a leading organization that addresses domestic violence and LGBT rights, from the registry of "foreign agents."

Lawyer Pavel Chikov of the Agora legal defense organization said on March 11 that the Zamoskvoretsky district court rejected Nasiliyu.net's request to annul a Justice Ministry decision to add the group to its controversial list of organizations fulfilling the functions of a "foreign agent."

The ministry justified its move, made in December, by saying that the NGO had received foreign funding and was engaged in political activity. The NGO has denied it is politically active.

Chikov said earlier this month that the government's complaint against Nasiliyu.net said the group's activity in "publicizing the problem of domestic violence," "creating conditions so that victims know

where to turn for help," and "participating in promoting and conducting campaigns aimed at adopting a law against family and domestic violence" must be considered "political activity" under the "foreign-agent" laws. (...)

Russia's so-called foreign-agent legislation was adopted in 2012 and has been modified repeatedly. It requires nongovernmental organizations that receive foreign assistance and that the government deems to be engaged in political activity to be registered, to identify themselves as "foreign agents," and to submit to audits. (...)

Source: [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#)

### **Czech MPs support bill to compensate illegally sterilized women**

The [bill to compensate women who have been sterilized unlawfully](#) was supported during its first reading by members of the Czech lower house today. It will now move into committee.

MPs from the governing ANO and Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) parties had submitted the bill along with opposition members from the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) and TOP 09. Czech Government Human Rights Commissioner Helena Válková, who is also an MP for ANO, asked that the bill be given a preferential reading on March 10.

The bill has also been supported by Czech Deputy Public Defender of Rights, Monika Šimůnková, who previously called on MPs to adopt it. In her view it is the only opportunity for the women who have been harmed in this way to access justice, as bringing their cases to court would not be likely to result in compensation awards. (...)

If the bill is eventually adopted, the victims would be able to apply for a one-off compensation payment of CZK 300 000 [EUR 11 000]. The practice of sterilizations performed unlawfully on the territories of the former Czechoslovakia and present-day Czech Republic and Slovakia have affected hundreds if not thousands of women since the 1960s, especially Romani women.

State policy in Czechoslovakia fully regulated the practice in 1971 when a directive on the performance of such sterilizations was adopted. Romani women and others were indeed systematically sterilized without their full and informed consent as a way of controlling their birth rate, as was [reported by the Czech Public Defender of Rights in his 2005 report on the issue](#).

Source: [Romea.cz](#)

## **Poland: Escalating Threats to Women Activists**

On March 31, Human Rights Watch, CIVICUS, and International Planned Parenthood Federation-European Network (IPPF-EN) informed of bomb and death threats targeting at least seven groups in Poland for supporting women's rights and the right to abortion are disturbing reminders of escalating risks to women's human rights defenders in the country. (...)

between March 15 and March 26 from seven organizations in Poland that have been threatened due to their work for or perceived support of women's rights issues, including Abortion Dream Team, Federation for Women and Family Planning (Federa), Feminoteka, FundacjaFOR, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Women's Rights Centre (Centrum Praw Kobiet), and All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet).

At least six human rights organizations in Warsaw, including the women's rights groups Feminoteka, Women's Rights Centre and Women's Strike, received bomb threats via email on International Women's Day, March 8, 2021. The threats said they were "payback" for supporting the Women's Strike movement, which has been at the forefront of [mass protests](#) following [increased restrictions](#) on access to legal abortion. Some organizations received the threat at multiple email addresses. (...)

Staff members at [Feminoteka](#), Federa, [Women's Rights Centre](#), Women's Strike, [FundacjaFOR](#), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, and [Grupa Stonewall](#) reported bomb threats received between March 8 and March 23 to police, who checked the premises of their offices and found no evidence of explosive devices. However, some said that the police minimized the security risks and made no commitment to open and pursue a full investigation. Only one person who had reported threats had been told by the police after she inquired that they sent the file to the prosecutor, but she received no information about whether the prosecutor would pursue the investigation.

These escalating threats come amid ongoing public protests led by the Women's Strike movement following an October 2020 [ruling](#) by Poland's politically compromised Constitutional Tribunal that virtually eliminates access to legal abortion. The ruling officially [took effect](#) after publication in the national Journal of Laws in January.

Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)

## FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

### **Federa on 65<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Commission on the status of women**

From 15 to 26 March 2021, the 65<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women took place. Due to COVID-19 situation, most of the meetings were virtual. Priority theme this year was: Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Read more about the CSW and its programme [here](#).

The coordinator of international advocacy of the Federation for Women and Family Planning took part in the side event on 18 March organised by International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and Planning Familial (France); sponsored by France, Denmark and UNFPA. The side event is called ["SRHR generation! – Ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights: a priority for the Generation Equality Forum action coalition"](#). The representative of the Federation had an opportunity to ask questions to the sponsors on actions they could/would take as regards the perpetual violations by Poland fundamental rights of Polish women and girls in terms of access to the reproductive health services, including abortion.

During this exchange, the French Minister for Gender Equality, Ms Elisabeth Moreno officialy declared universal access for all women to abortion in France, including Polish women. We hope that this news will be accompanied by concrete measures that would facilitate access to abortion in France.

Source: [Federation for Women and Family Planning](#)

### **Implementation of the Istanbul Convention and sexual and reproductive rights in Croatia**

Although Croatia ratified and put into force the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in 2018, the problem of gender based violence remains. Victims and survivors are still frequently not guaranteed physical distance from the perpetrators when giving statements to the police; problematic practices of double arrests and penalizing both victim and the perpetrator, soft penalties for perpetrator and domestic violence that falls under category of misdemeanors persist.

It is important to emphasize that Croatian legislation was harmonized in line with Convention's regulations even before the official ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Croatian legal framework

is frequently being improved, but the biggest problem is the inconsistent application of the law in practice, the individual approach of individual judges, police officers, social workers, medical staff, educational workers and other professionals who're the contact point to the victims. Quality and well-established multisector cooperation of all relevant stakeholders in the field of violence prevention and control is necessary.

Solving these problems is possible by providing adequate education for experts from all relevant fields, especially within the judiciary, but also by raising awareness of future generations – by breaking gender stereotypes and learning about gender equality. Trainings for experts who work with women victims of violence and victims of domestic violence are being provided, but inconsistently and unsystematically. Organizations of these trainings are often NGO's, with the financial support of EU and/or national grants.

Far-right politicians are still terrified of gender ideology and including the term 'gender' in the Croatian legislation, even though this term is already being used in many laws, regulations, national strategies, Constitutional Court rulings, and decisions of specialized agencies, for more than 15 years. Some politicians are requesting amendments of all legislative acts in which the term 'gender' was used. For now, such requests did not reach any formal level.

Regarding the establishment of shelters for victims of domestic violence, the Croatian Government promised to establish 6 shelters by the end of 2019. So far, just 2 agreements for the establishment of shelters for victims of domestic violence were concluded.

Abortion is still very unavailable for women in Croatia – unavailable because they cannot pay for it and because most gynecologists in Croatia do not want to perform it. Back in 2017, the Constitutional Court called on the Parliament to adopt a new abortion law within 2 years. Four years later, all we have is a task force that supposedly gathers experiences from other countries, a group established by right-wing politicians and made by people who are against abortion. In reality, Croatian women often go to Slovenia or other counties because getting an abortion in Croatia is close to impossible. Regarding the adoption of the new abortion law, everything is still uncertain.

In February 2021 a member of the Croatian Parliament, Hrvoje Zekanović, started collecting signatures to pass a law that would ban abortion. According to this law, abortion would be possible only when pregnancy endangers the life of the pregnant woman. His proposal failed because only 10 deputies signed it (30 of them are needed for the bill to enter the procedure).

B.a.B.e. Be active. Be emancipated. Has organised the final international conference within the project "How Expertise Leads to Prevention, Learning, Identification, Networking and Ending Gender

Based Violence” (HELPLINE), funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship program of the European Union, and co-financed by the City of Zagreb and the Government Office of the Republic of Croatia. The aim of the project was to provide protection and support to women victims of violence by promoting a multidisciplinary approach to the problem, and the project was implemented in partnership with the Association for Victim and Witness Support, the Government Office for Gender Equality, the Police Academy, the Judicial Academy, the Institute for Family and Social Research from Slovakia, and with the support of the Gender Equality Ombudsperson.

Source: [B.a.B.e.](#)

### **“Talks about women’s rights” TV programs by Women’s Rights Center**

A new TV series “Talks about women’s rights” was recently launched on Armenian Shant TV.

The TV program is devoted to the coverage of the issue of domestic violence in Armenia, the RA Law on the “Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of the Victims of Domestic Violence and Restoration of Solidarity in the Family”, as well as measures to fight violence against women and the international documents ratified by the RA Government.

Taking into consideration the role of media as the most powerful and effective means of transferring information to a wide audience, the Women’s Rights Center (hereafter WRC) chose the launching TV programs as its main direction within the project under the funding from the European Union.

Currently, 12 TV programs with experts/guest speakers of state and non-state institutions dealing with the issue were produced and broadcasted in collaboration with “Shant” TV channel.

The format of the program gives an opportunity to represent the work of the relevant structures, to reveal gaps and challenges they are facing while combating the problem in Armenia. The appropriate information on women’s rights, the situation on domestic violence in the country, the prevention and protection mechanisms and measures, the efforts and input in the field and done activities has been shared by the experts. The role and functions of each structure in terms of the DV and GBV issues were represented as well.

The adoption of RA Law “On Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of the Victims of Domestic Violence and Restoration of Solidarity in the Family” in 2018 changed the responsibilities and activities of most of the structures dealing with the issue bringing new orders and mechanisms for protecting rights of the person subjected to domestic violence. People who never heard of this Law

and its protective mechanisms get a chance for it as the Law sets the rules for the protection of victims' rights and emphasizes the restoration of solidarity in the family.

According to the data analysis provided by "Shant" TV, the number of viewers for all 12 TV programs is 178 000. The total number of views on YouTube channels is 31 218.

The first guests of the program were the experts of the Women's Rights Center. During the program, existing problems in the sphere were raised, the adoption of the law and its role for women survivors of domestic violence were highlighted one more time, the role of the police was emphasized, and mechanisms in terms of raising awareness of the issue were pointed out.

Source: [Women's Rights Center](#)

### **Conference on the Rights of Intersex Children: The Importance of Inclusive Health and Legal Care**

Sarajevo Open Centre (SOC) organized a conference entitled "Between the Sexes and Reality: The Rights of Intersex Children in the Healthcare System of Bosnia and Herzegovina", on 5 March 2021 in Sarajevo. The conference was the final event of the project *Human Rights of intersex children in the healthcare system of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, which started with [research](#) (2020), continued with a [manual](#), as well as a [campaign](#) to raise awareness about intersex persons. At the conference, we gathered health workers, especially staff from relevant clinics (clinical centres and hospitals) that we contacted for research, as well as those who underwent our training on the needs and rights of transgender persons from 2018 to 2020. There were also officials from the ministries of health and lawyers from institutions for the protection of human rights and gender equality.

The aim of the event was to talk with medical and legal experts about the findings of the research, about intersex issues from several angles and see where we are missing in BiH and how to overcome the challenges. The conference proved to be an excellent opportunity to gather the professional public, create further modalities of cooperation and improvement of the position and rights of intersex persons in healthcare and the legal system.

The conference was organized in four panels:

- Panel I - Providing ethical and inclusive healthcare to intersex persons
- Panel II - Basic principles of good clinical practice in the treatment of intersex persons
- Panel III - Legal and medical regulation of intersex in BiH
- Panel IV - Problems and needs of intersex persons in the field of human rights



More information about the conference available [here](#) (in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian).

### **Rape victims feel like suspects in the police, not victims**

*Written by: Amina Dizdar (Sarajevo Open Centre)*

After Serbian actress Milena Radulovic went public with allegations of rape by her acting professor, numerous other victims from across the Balkans came forward. Their testimonies, which were published on the "I did not ask" Facebook page (Nisam tražila), shook the region and provoked many reactions. Great support came to the anonymous victims, but also many threats and reports from the site that tried to silence the victims. Internet portals that reported on this topic were flooded with comments such as "what was she waiting for so far", "she must have wanted it as soon as she didn't report it immediately" and the like.

We can't help but wonder why, when it comes to rape and sexual harassment, this is the first reaction? Why is it the first instinct for a large number of people to try to justify the perpetrator without showing any sympathy for the victims? Why are the victims silent? We will try to answer these questions with this text.

More available (in BCS language) [here](#).

### **Contact us in case of gender-based discrimination!**

In the coming period, Sarajevo Open Centre will be working on recording cases of discrimination based on gender, in cooperation with the Foundation for Local Democracy. The ones who think they have experienced discrimination based on gender and do not know what they should do about it, or they are not sure if it is discrimination, can seek legal advice via email [amina@soc.ba](mailto:amina@soc.ba) and [delila@soc.ba](mailto:delila@soc.ba).

### **International Trans Visibility Day – 31 March 2021**

Transgender persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot exercise their rights - legal gender recognition is possible only after complete medical gender reassignment, and endocrinological therapy and surgery can be performed only abroad and the costs are borne by the transgender persons themselves, because the BH medical facilities do not cover them.

March 31 marks the International Day of Transgender Persons, a day dedicated to raising public awareness of the existence and presence of transgender people in society, as well as drawing attention to transphobia, stigmatization and discriminatory acts encountered by transgender persons in everyday life and at the institutional level.

Special support for transgender persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina is provided by Sarajevo Open Centre, which this year launched a campaign through social networks, with the aim of raising citizens' awareness of the problems faced by trans persons.

More on the problems they face you can read in the article available [here](#).

Source for the four previous entries: [Sarajevo Open Center](#)

### **Piloting medical abortion in North Macedonia**

Medical abortion is not available in Macedonia as a method for termination of unplanned pregnancy, nor are medical abortion drugs registered in the country. The benefits of medical abortion is now more apparent than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic, since it reduces the need for physical contact with a healthcare worker and overcoming additional barriers to safe abortion care during a time when health systems are overwhelmed.

In March 2021, HERA in collaboration with the University Clinic of Ob&Gyn (Skopje, the capital) started a pilot program for medical abortion care. The project aims to initiate the the development of a service delivery model for medical abortion in the country following the Ministry of Health approval of the National Clinical Guidelines for safe abortion on December 30, 2020. The national guidelines, for the first time, provides clinical protocol for medical staff to perform medical abortion, which is in compliance with updated WHO standards. Furthermore, within the Preventive Programme for Mother and Child, Ministry of Health has allocated 10.000USD for procurement of abortion drugs in order to implement the pilot project in the University Clinic, thus has demonstrated the political commitment to ensure medical abortion integrated within the comprehensive abortion care.

As of February, HERA is supporting the clinic in its efforts to pilot medical abortion care. Together with the clinic staff we have designed a pilot model for service delivery, did the renovation and refurbishment of clinic premises (where the services will be provided) and conducted the training of the 10 medical staff with the support of Karolniska Institute in Stockholm. Informational leaflets for patients on medical abortion have been also printed. The pilot project is expected to reach 150 women with medical abortion care by the end of October 2021.

The pilot program particularly has intention to document evidence-based facts (evaluation study) that medical abortion is equally acceptable and safe for women as it is with the surgical procedure. Moreover the results will enable development of a national strategy for scaling up availability and accessibility of medical abortion throughout entire country, especially in circumstances when drugs are not registered and the market is very small and since healthcare providers lack competences to deliver medical abortion services.

Source: [HERA](#)

### **Strengthening Armenian preparedness and response mechanism in provision of sexual and reproductive health services in conditions of emergencies and humanitarian crises with focus on COVID-19**

Albanian Center for Population and Development (ACPD) with support of UNFPA and Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP) and coordination with Operatory of Health Services (OHS) has performed training sessions on MISP in the light of COVID-19 outbreak. There were 20 training sessions performed in national level with 350 health care providers (211 medical doctors, 108 nurses and 31 specialists of Health Care Units) at district level to improve the knowledge and skills on provision of sexual and reproductive health services in Covid-19 conditions.

During these training sessions aiming to improve the knowledge and skills of health care provider's main recommendations were the need to have a standardized information in national level and expansion of the knowledge's received other colleagues who were not part of the trainings.

ACPD and key stakeholders have advocated through consultations, meetings and awareness raising campaigns to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection for the institutionalization of the drafted guidelines for provision of Sexual dhe Reproductive Health Services which in fact are endorsed on 27th October 2020, by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection. One of the recommendations included in the document is introduction of digital health and telemedicine at primary health care. In line to these guidelines, 36 Clinical procedures; 412 posters and 15, 000 leaflets were produced as additional materials to support health care providers for provision of better and standardized case managements. 4 dissemination meetings aiming to present and explain the use and importance of this IEC materials were carried out in Tirana, Durres, Elbasan and Fushe Kruje.

At the end of the initiative a closing meeting with key actors engaged in the whole project and with presence of health care professionals was carried out to address all the recommendations among

which was the role of the media in raising awareness and reaching the population with the right messages.

Source: [Albanian Center for Population and Development](#)

### **Romanian round table for the Manifesto of 343 anniversary**

As part of the the Generation Equality Forum, advisory board member Daniela Draghici, was an invited speaker, on behalf of the SEX vs The STORK Association, to a round table panel marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Manifesto of 343 in France, along with other sexual and reproductive health and rights experts from France and Romania. The event was co-organized by the French Embassy and the French Institute in Bucharest. Several key activists from France attended and the event was a real success. Another event is scheduled for June.

The Manifesto of the 343 (*Le Manifeste des 343*), published by Le Nouvel Observateur on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1971, was written by Simone de Beauvoir and signed de personalities such as Catherine Deneuve, Delphine Seyrig and Agnès Varda. The signatories stated they had to resort to abortion at a time when it was illegal in France. This gesture reopened the debate on decriminalizing and legalizing abortion in France, which climaxed in 1975 with the law advanced by Simone Veil, which legalized voluntary termination of pregnancy.

The recording of the round table is still available on the [Facebook page of the French Institute](#) and will soon be uploaded on the [YouTube channel](#).

*Input kindly provided by ASTRA Network's board member, Daniela Draghici.*

Upon the 10th anniversary of the Istanbul Convention, the Romanian government has reaffirmed its support and expressed its certainty that this approach will secure a stronger legal framework in the EU, as well as pave the way for the enactment of coherent policies regarding the prevention and combating of violence against women.

*The note was provided by Diana Neaga, new president of the Society for Feminist Analyses AnA*

## RESOURCES

### **Amnesty International's updated policy on abortion: A resource for medical providers**

*Treating abortion as a matter of reproductive autonomy is essential to promoting health, complying with medical ethics, and advancing human rights. When pregnant people can make autonomous decisions about their pregnancies, their health and human rights outcomes improve. Additionally, medical providers that support autonomous sexual and reproductive health decision-making can provide care in line with the highest ethical standards and promote pregnant individuals' human rights. This article highlights Amnesty International's updated institutional abortion policy which uses a reproductive autonomy frame to promote the full realization of human rights for all pregnant people. The policy relies on decades of evidence, the organization's learning from abortion research and advocacy around the world, and evolving human rights law and standards. While not specifically developed for a medical audience, Amnesty International's updated policy can be a useful resource for providers who seek to promote reproductive autonomy and achieve better health outcomes for their patients.*

Read more [online](#).

### **“My Body is My Own - Claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination” from UNFPA**

A ground-breaking report focusing on bodily autonomy by UNFPA is now [available online](#). From the introduction:

*Through our leadership in the new Generation Equality Action Coalition on Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and through this edition of the State of World Population, UNFPA is highlighting why bodily autonomy is a universal right that must be upheld. The report reveals how serious many of the shortfalls in bodily autonomy are; many have worsened under the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Right now, for instance, record numbers of women and girls are at risk of gender-based violence and harmful practices such as early marriage.*

*The report also outlines solutions that are already at hand, while making the point that success requires much more than a disconnected series of projects or services, as important as these may be. Real, sustained progress largely depends on uprooting gender inequality and all forms of discrimination, and transforming the social and economic structures that maintain them.*

ASTRA Network Members: Albania - Albanian Family Planning Association; Armenia - Society Without Violence; Armenia - Women's Resource Center; Armenia - Women's Rights Center; Azerbaijan - Center "Women and Modern World"; Belarus - Women's Independent Democratic Movement of Belarus; Bulgaria - Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Bulgaria - Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation; Bulgaria - Gender Education, Research and Technologies; Bulgaria - Demetra Association; Bulgaria - Gender Alternatives Foundation; Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo Open Center; Croatia - B.a.b.e.; Croatia – CESI; Croatia - Women's Room; Georgia – HERA XXI; Georgia – Real People, Real Vision; Georgia - Women's Center; Hungary – PATENT; BOCS Foundation; Kazakhstan - The Legal Center for Women's Initiatives "Sana Sezim"; Lithuania - Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Latvia - Latvia's Association for Family Planning And Sexual Health; Macedonia - Association for emancipation, solidarity and equality of women; Macedonia – H.E.R.A.; Macedonia – Shelter Center; Moldova – Family Planning Association; Moldova - Reproductive Health Training Center; Poland - Federation for Women and Family Planning; Ponton Group of Sex Educators; Romania - A.L.E.G.; Romania - AnA: Society for Feminist Analysis; Romania - Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives; Romania - The East European Institute of Reproductive Health; Romania – SEXUL vs BARZA/SEX vs THE STORK; Russia - Novgorod Gender Center; Russia – Russian Association for Population and Development; Slovakia – Pro Choice; Tajikistan – Gender and Development; Ukraine - Women Health and Family Planning; Ukraine - Charitable SALUS Foundation; Uzbekistan - Future Generation

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