

## **The Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans**

### **Process to Develop RYCO Strategic Plan 2018 - 2020**

#### ***Background***

The establishment of RYCO was initiated at the Western Balkans Summit in Berlin in August 2014, as part of the Berlin Process, which aims at strengthening intra-regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries, alongside ongoing European integration processes.

Civil society organisations in the Western Balkans, especially youth organisations, have been experimenting with intra-regional exchange since the late 1990s, under the auspices of European and global programmes open to them. Evaluations of these experiences show that they are of immense benefit for the personal, professional and attitudinal development of young people across the region, and that they have added value for the development of regional networking and cooperation. At the same time, it has become apparent that active institutional support from the highest levels of government across the region is a prerequisite for youth exchange to accomplish its mission and goals with impact, especially when those are the development of mutual regional understanding, intercultural dialogue and reconciliation. The consensus among civil society and governments across the region today is that a Regional Youth Cooperation Office, initiated at the highest political level, can provide the level of institutionalisation necessary to promote regional youth cooperation and exchange in a sustainable and effective manner. The 2016 signing of the agreement between the governments to establish the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans in Paris on 4 July is the practical expression of this recognition.

The process to establish RYCO has an impressive list of achievements under its belt already. Beyond the fact that true regional commitment, ownership and political will have brought this initiative to fruition as the first institutionally anchored mechanism for youth exchange and cooperation in the region, it is one of the most significant and tangible result of the Berlin Process. RYCO is a good practice example of how the governmental and civic sectors can work together constructively, when the mechanisms are designed appropriately. Furthermore, young people were involved in the process and will continue to be represented in the governance of RYCO. Finally, the process itself has been a contribution to reconciliation in the region. By focusing on building a common future through youth empowerment and collaboration, it has already been possible to develop a more constructive approach to dealing with the past.

With the appointment of the new Secretary General, attention is now being turned to making RYCO operational for its mission as fast as possible. While RYCO's Statute has been elaborated, RYCO does not yet dispose of a clear set of strategic documents that provide a robust understanding of what it is for and how it will work. The Secretary General has been mandated by the Governing Board to make steps to create such documents.

Ongoing evaluation of the RYCO process has revealed a number of clear opportunities and risks characterising the context within which RYCO now has to establish and consolidate its operations, as follows:

- while until recently it was necessary to focus on the formal agreements and the development of the institutional mechanisms for establishing RYCO as an intergovernmental agreement and organisation, it is now essential to develop deeper understanding and consensus on what RYCO is actually supposed to do and achieve, in general, and in its first phase of operation;

- while in general there is consensus that RYCO's most important purpose is to pursue youth and educational exchange in the service of greater regional understanding and reconciliation, many of the key concepts related to this purpose have not been specifically elaborated upon or defined consensually until now. The fact that these concepts are far from neutral needs to be acknowledged, as does the political and intercultural challenge that developing the necessary consensus around these ideas requires;
- while there is an urgent need for RYCO's new leadership to prioritise becoming operational at the earliest possible time, it is equally necessary to resist the urge to run before one can walk, meaning that it requires time, reflection, discussion and dialogue to operationalise the vision and mission of a new institution into a relevant and realistic Strategic Plan, especially one that is supposed to serve lofty purposes such as mutual regional understanding and reconciliation;
- while RYCO is an intergovernmental institution, the active and full involvement of civil society has been a priority, respecting best practice and international standards of youth policy development and implementation. Fully integrating the co-management dimension is a mark of quality that sets the RYCO initiative apart from governmental youth initiatives;
- while the RYCO process has very seriously engaged with the experiences of other institutions promoting youth exchange for reconciliation in Europe, and in particular has learned from the experience of the FGYO, the specific regional history and current context of the Western Balkan countries individually and collectively requires that local stakeholders literally 'own' RYCO's vision and mission, and the strategic priorities that flow from these.

These points have considerably informed the development of the proposal for the structure and content of the RYCO Strategic Plan and for the process that should be undertaken to elaborate it, and therefore the points developed upon in this document.

### ***The current document***

This document has two purposes:

- to introduce the RYCO Governing Board to the rationale and justification for developing an in depth 3-year Strategic Plan for the establishment and consolidation of RYCO from 2018 to 2020;
- to present a proposal for the content of the RYCO Strategic Plan 2018 - 2020 based on a review of examples of strategy documents prepared by other relevant institutions and organisations that have similar aims and objectives as RYCO and to suggest an approach to and process for elaborating the Strategic Plan until end 2017.

The Governing Board discussion of this document should result in a strong consensus on the necessity of a participatory process to develop an outcome led Strategic Plan for RYCO and a strong mandate for the Secretariat to pursue a process that can ensure that until the end of 2017.

To this end, this document presents

- a synthesis of information based on existing documentation regarding the values, principles and purposes of RYCO that can be considered the current consensus on what RYCO is for and what its strategic priorities and directions in its first phase of development should be;
- a proposal for the structure and contents of the proposed RYCO Strategic Plan 2018 - 2020;
- a detailed description of an approach to and process for elaborating the proposed RYCO Strategic Plan until the end of 2017.

## ***Definitions and terminology<sup>1</sup>***

Definitions of the key concepts and terms most relevant for our work can be contested and even controversial. To avoid any misunderstandings in reading this document, we shall clarify these terms as we understand them. These definitions are consistent with dictionary and encyclopaedic definitions. They have, however, been developed and adapted in view of the discussions that have taken place during the process and during the negotiations that have taken place on the establishment of RYCO. We assume that as part of the further process of strategy development, it will be necessary to discuss these in more detail to ensure a lasting consensus about the true nature of what RYCO is for.

**Reconciliation:** The process of finding a way to make different ideas, facts, etc., exist or be true at the same time, thereby addressing past or current conflicts in a constructive manner.

**Intercultural learning:** A process of education that supports people to both understand culture and interact with people from cultures different than their own. In this understanding culture can be many things (political, social, religious, national, community, regional, gender, etc) and individuals can identify with or belong to more than one.

**Dialogue:** The exchange of ideas and opinions and discussion between representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution.

**Diversity:** The inclusion of different types of people (such as people with different cultural backgrounds) in a group or organisation.

**Youth exchange:** Youth exchanges allow groups of young people from different countries to meet, live together and work on shared projects for short periods of time.

**Cooperation:** The process of working together in a common effort.

**Youth mobility:** The act of moving from one place to another for a purpose such as education, work or volunteering.

**Quality:** A degree of excellence.

**Key workers:** These are people that work with young people in different kinds of educational, leisure-time, volunteering, sport and cultural processes. They may be educators, working in formal or non-formal settings, they may be volunteering or exchange programme managers or implementers, they may be youth workers or social workers, they may be sport trainers, or cultural operators, they may be paid or voluntary staff of different institutions or organisations and they are often young themselves. More often than not, key workers combine several of these profiles in their work with young people. The criteria for being a key worker is that the person concerned is engaging directly with young people in a nominally organised manner (even if that is an informal group / initiative).

## ***Statement of purpose***

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this document we have referred to the Merriam-Webster online encyclopaedic dictionary of the English language: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/> and a variety of specialist literature developed in the European and international youth, education and mobility sectors. All reference material can be consulted in the bibliography.

The process to establish RYCO has come a long way in identifying its key values and principles, main considerations for its vision and mission and key elements for the formulation of its strategic directions and priorities. These are contained in a variety of documents, each of which has its own style and terminology. At this point, what is required is a concise summary of the main elements of what could be understood as a RYCO 'Statement of Purpose' and some specification of terms and concepts. This section presents a synthesis of what is contained in current documentation and is offered as the foundation stones for the further elaboration of the RYCO Strategic Plan through a more collaborative and participatory process involving the necessary diversity of stakeholders and taking an outcome oriented approach (to be described in the next section). As the Secretariat of RYCO, we not only have the responsibility to operationalise RYCO, we have a stake in its success. That is why it is important also for us to own RYCO's statement of purpose. For this reason, we have chosen to formulate the following sections in the 'we' form.

## **Values**

Our core values are respect for human rights, diversity, human dignity; solidarity; peace; trust based on mutual understanding, acceptance and respect. These are the values of European integration and the values we wish to promote in exchange and cooperation processes between young people and their key workers in and among the Western Balkan countries.

## **Principles**

As we understand the current consensus, the principles that will guide our work are:

Equity & inclusion: We seek to foster inclusion and equity through all of our work. This means that creating opportunities for deliberate dialogue, and not only representation, among young people and their key workers across the diversity of the Western Balkan region and its national societies will be a primary criteria for the work RYCO supports.

Co-management: Young people and their representative organisations have been involved in the development of the RYCO process from the very beginning, and have contributed as equal partners to its creation alongside their governmental colleagues. Our governance structures and processes will be guided by the principle of co-management because it will support the legitimacy of our institution in the eyes of its primary beneficiary groups, young people and their organisations, and in the international youth sector. This will be fostered by governance arrangements that include the representation of the governmental and non-governmental organisations, and by regular consultation with the specialist organisations relevant to our fields of action and key outcomes.

Interdependence: Our success is predicated on our stakeholders' acceptance that ours is a common effort. We will strive to develop a constructive and mutually supportive approach to fostering interdependence and trust in working relations among our institution's different branches. The Governing Board plays a key role for this and must lead by example. A team-working approach among HQ in Tirana and the local branches will be essential and shall be actively fostered through participatory planning and targeted capacity development.

Transparency: We seek to be open and clear about what we are doing at all times. To this end we will develop public information approaches and communicate about our work and will engage with the demands of our stakeholders and beneficiaries for information in a proactive manner.

Autonomy: While we are a inter-governmental organisation, and the political situations in and between the Contracting Parties will necessarily influence the conditions for our work, our mission governs our work and how we shall go about implementing it. Our autonomy to pursue our mission is key for our success, and we will seek to safeguard it, irrespective of political developments in our region.

Accountability: We are accountable not only to our Governing Board, but also to our end beneficiaries - young people and their organisations and initiatives. To ensure the highest level of accountability, we will seek relations that help us to understand the needs of our beneficiaries within the context of our mission and to develop programmes that are relevant.

## **Vision**

Young people and people that work with them have equitable access to youth and educational exchange and cooperation processes that foster a constructive approach to the region's common past and support development, reconciliation and regional/European integration in the Western Balkan region.

## **Mission**

RYCO supports, funds and stewards high quality youth and educational exchange and cooperation processes with young people and their key workers in the Western Balkans to support development, reconciliation, European and intra-regional integration and the active role of young people in diverse, forward looking and prosperous societies that take a constructive approach to their common regional past.

## **Strategic directions and priorities**

Our principles and values, and our vision and mission, determine what RYCO should achieve, the outcomes we should deliver, as an institution and as a key actor of the youth sector in the Western Balkans. Broadly speaking, RYCO's fields of operation are the youth, education, culture and sport sectors, with special emphasis on youth and education. Our work should contribute to improving the availability, accessibility, quality and impact of exchange, mobility and reconciliation work conducted in these fields, especially with young people and the people that work directly with them. Our emphasis should be on the quality of the outcomes of participation for beneficiaries.

At the moment, we see our primary outcomes as follows. These should be further developed upon and specified in a participatory manner to ensure consensus:

Exchange and mobility: Increased mobility and exchange of young people and their key workers among the countries of the Western Balkans that is fully representative of the diversity of the region.

Sectoral development: Greater competence and competence among voluntary and/or professional accompanying young people in youth, education, sport, culture activities dealing with reconciliation, intercultural learning and other European themes through exchange and mobility.

Reconciliation and intercultural learning:

- Neighbourly relations and intercultural understanding among the young people of the region (in all their diversity);
- Consensual and constructive approaches to dealing with the common past of the Western Balkan region in activities with young people;
- Greater understanding of European and regional integration among young people and of its relevance for them;
- More capacity of young people to play an active role in building their own and their societies' futures.

### ***How we want to work***

We are a new institution. This offers some opportunities to determine how we work, that older institutions, especially governmental organisations in our region, do not have the benefit from.

We want our work to lead by example. That is why we have identified ambitions for the way we want to work:

Focus on outcomes: We want to deliver. Real work with real outcomes. By taking an outcome oriented approach, we identify what we want to deliver and the different complementary ways we can deliver those outcomes. Developing this approach, which is not common for intergovernmental organisation, will be fostered by a participatory strategy development process and the common identification of our desired outcomes among governing board and staff.

Responsiveness & flexibility: We want to dispense with the reputation of public service institutions as not being responsive to the needs of those they serve. As much as we need to work in a strategic manner, it will also be important for us to remain flexible and open for the needs being expressed by the people working at the front lines of their sectors. Our Advisory Board, our co-managed governance process and the development of close relations with beneficiary organisations will be essential to this effort.

Effectiveness and efficiency: Closely related to the previous point, we want to do the best work we can, using the the resources which are put at our disposal, and those that we raise ourselves in a responsibly, and in a timely manner.

Transparency & independence: As an intergovernmental organisation with a regional mission and with both a regional and national institutional presence, we need to be aware of political developments in the Contracting Parties. Nevertheless, politics is not our work. As a Secretariat, we will strive to maintain our independence, integrity and transparency in all of our work, which will focus on our mission and our vision for our region.

Innovation & quality: We want to do excellent work. To do so it is important to innovate and pay attention to quality. To this end we will need to develop evaluation, monitoring and quality assurance/development systems for both our programmatic portfolio and our internal work and governance processes. International standards and frameworks (such as the ISO frameworks for organisations delivering services in non-formal education) might be a useful starting point.

Intercultural & diverse: Our work is aimed at fostering intercultural relations in and between diverse societies in our region. To the extent we are able to access suitably qualified candidates of merit, our recruitment policy for our Headquarters will be to compose a staff that is representative of the diversity and realities of young people in our region. Local branches will be encouraged to consider the diversity of the societies where they are located in composing their staffs with relevant focus on inclusion of people from a variety of backgrounds, including minorities.

Visibility: We want to develop a corporate culture which is attractive, credible and inspiring of trust among young people and among their key workers around the region. For this we not only need to be all of those things, but we need to be visible and to communicate in a youth friendly manner with young people and their organisations and initiatives.

### ***An outcome-led approach to strategy development***

We propose to use an 'outcome led' approach to develop the RYCO strategy. This is an approach which focuses on the planning with the **results we want to deliver to the beneficiaries** of the work the strategy will promote in the front of our minds, rather than any objectives or agendas defined elsewhere.

This approach is both suitable and attractive for RYCO because it:

- makes sure the strategy development process has the target group and beneficiaries at the centre of its concern. In the case of RYCO, which is an intergovernmental institution, this will make the work it does and the way it works more accountable and responsive to the needs of the people it is supposed to serve;
- provides the opportunity for a variety of stakeholders with different individual interests to act in concert in one or more directions of common concern;
- focuses on contributing to changing something important for the target groups and for the region rather than on objectives that are important for any one government or stakeholder;
- favours delivery, accountability and realism as concerns what can be achieved;
- takes into account that strategy is a matter of prioritisation and that not all aspects of an institution's work can and need to be addressed immediately;
- acknowledges that there is more than one way to reach the identified outcomes, thereby challenging stakeholders to think and plan creatively;
- helps us to apply 'long-path' or intergenerational thinking to our strategy development process, rather than succumbing to the usual short-termism.<sup>2</sup>

To do strategy development requires that we:

- ask questions about what is important to the young people and the key workers we will be serving, rather than assuming we have all the answers !!!
- seek answers in available evidence of the situations, needs, challenges, concerns, aspirations of our target groups around the region, seeking similarities and understanding differences !!!
- include youth and their representatives in the process of strategy development to access their grassroots knowledge !!!
- identify a mutually and consensually agreed upon vision of the kind of region RYCO wants the Western Balkans wants to be in the future, including as a result of its own efforts !!!

<sup>2</sup> For more on this way of addressing long term planning, see: Ari Wallach: 3 ways to plan for the (very) long term. Online at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/ari\\_wallach\\_3\\_ways\\_to\\_plan\\_for\\_the\\_very\\_long\\_term#t-549064](https://www.ted.com/talks/ari_wallach_3_ways_to_plan_for_the_very_long_term#t-549064)

A in-residence strategy retreat including all stakeholders of this process (governing board, advisory board and secretariat) can provide the ideal opportunity to work in this way on the development of the strategy. Furthermore, some stakeholders of the RYCO process already have some experience of working in this way around the development or the evaluation of their (national) youth strategies and action plans with some interesting results.

***Proposal for the content and structure of the Strategic Plan 2018 - 2020***



Chapter	Detailed content
Introduction to the Strategic Plan	<p>General overview / background</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● History of RYCO process</li> <li>● Berlin process &amp; EU integration</li> </ul> <p>Main contents of the document</p> <p>How the document was developed (i.e. the process)</p> <p>The approach taken (i.e. an outcome-led approach to strategy development) and justification for that choice</p>
Why RYCO?	<p>Overview of the context analysis that led to RYCO's establishment</p> <p>Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats pertinent to RYCO's establishment and its strategic positioning vis a vis its main issues of concern in the region</p>
Values and principles of RYCO	<p>A summary of the mandated consensus on RYCO's values and principles</p>
Vision and mission of RYCO	<p>Presentation of the agreed formulations for RYCO's vision and mission statements</p> <p>Some information about the issues that were important in the discussion and decision-making on these consensually agreed statements</p>
Strategic priorities: the outcomes RYCO will pursue	<p>The presentation of the fully elaborated upon outcomes that RYCO should pursue through its work in order to fulfil its mission and vision</p> <p>Further elaboration on the expected impacts of RYCO's work / interventions</p>
Strategic direction 1: RYCO's programme	<p>Programme portfolios</p> <p>These are a prerequisite for RYCO to establish its fields of engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Topics (field relevant, to be identified)</li> <li>● Beneficiary categories (youth, key workers)</li> <li>● Concepts (intercultural learning, reconciliation, etc)</li> <li>● Sectors other than youth (culture, sport and education)</li> </ul>
Strategic direction 2: Consolidation of RYCO as an institution	<p>Development and consolidation the RYCO as an institution</p> <p>Management and governance related work</p> <p>Prerequisites for making RYCO effective for mission and efficient in its operations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● capacity building</li> <li>● sustainability measures</li> <li>● relations with beneficiaries</li> <li>● dissemination, visibility and communication</li> <li>● partnerships</li> <li>● advocacy</li> <li>● fundraising</li> <li>● quality assurance / quality development</li> <li>● evaluation, monitoring and social impact of programme</li> </ul>

	interventions
Measures / key activity categories	Description of the different measures that will be undertaken to achieve outcomes through the programme and for the consolidation of RYCO as an institution
Strategy implementation - conditions and mechanisms	<p>Fulfilling RYCO's ambitions for how it wants to work</p> <p>Elaboration on approaches for dealing with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long term challenges and risk mitigation</li> <li>- Monitoring and evaluation of strategy implementation</li> <li>- Chains of command and relations between stakeholders (governance and management)</li> <li>- Working across multiple sectors (youth, education, culture and sport)</li> </ul>
Framework action plan for 2018 - 2020	Main activities and milestones in the 1st three year Strategic Plan
2018 action plan and budget	Detailed plan and budget for implementation in 2018

### ***Process to develop the Strategic Plan in 2017***

<b>Step</b>	<b>Details</b>
<b>Step 0</b>	Recruit and initiate preparation with external facilitators and drafting expert for the strategy development retreat (July 2017)
<b>Step 1</b>	Compose Advisory Board and organise first meeting to discuss content of RYCO priorities and its own role (Summer 2017)
<b>Step 2</b>	<p>Preparatory work for strategy retreat to take place (through September 2017)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● further desk research regarding good practice in the youth exchange and cooperation field</li> <li>● evaluation of initial call for proposals</li> <li>● meeting of external facilitation team and HQ secretariat people in charge</li> <li>● initial drafting of formulations</li> <li>● assessment of staff competencies</li> <li>● approach to the retreat - outcomes oriented planning process</li> <li>● programme and plan for facilitating the strategy retreat</li> </ul>
<b>Step 3</b>	<p>Retreat with all recruited stakeholders so far - Advisory Board, Governing Board, Secretariat (in October)</p> <p>The retreat will serve two parallel purposes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● define content elements for the strategy document</li> <li>● team and capacity building</li> </ul>
<b>Step 4</b>	<p>Drafting (in October)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General, but one has to lead and be involved in the actual writing and coordination of drafting, and 1 / 2 programme coordinators depending on their division of responsibilities</li> <li>● external drafting support from strategy consultant</li> <li>● Key sections should be written by local coordinators and office staff according to expertise and the experience of the first open call</li> </ul>
<b>Step 5</b>	<p>Consultation on the draft Strategic Plan (in November)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Digital consultation of Advisory Board, Governing Board, Secretariat</li> <li>● Validation meetings and events to consult with national level stakeholders not involved so far (can be supported by the Executive boards on national level and the ministries, all on the same day/in the same week)</li> </ul>
<b>Step 6</b>	Revision and finalisation by Secretariat on the basis of consultation results (by end November)
<b>Step 7</b>	Final adoption and mandate to implement by Governing Board at their annual meeting (in mid-December 2017)

***Initial description of the Strategy Development Retreat***

<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to develop key parameters and contents for the drafting of the new youth strategy (vision, key outcomes of RYCO programming, pathways for achieving the outcomes, etc)</li> <li>● to help different stakeholder groups to understand their role in the implementation of the Strategic Plan, in the governance and management of RYCO and in its overall consolidation over its first 3-year strategy cycle</li> <li>● to create ownership among key stakeholders and implementers for a consensually developed Strategic Plan for the first 3 years of RYCO's operations</li> <li>● to develop the capacity of the different stakeholder groups to work together</li> </ul>
<b>Expected outcomes / outputs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Key content elements of the new strategy</li> <li>● Increased commitment and buy-in for the strategy development and implementation process on the part of attending stakeholders</li> <li>● A better understanding among stakeholders of the different roles and division of responsibilities under the newly proposed RYCO management and governance system</li> <li>● A clearer picture of the challenges and risks associated with RYCOs consolidation, that can help to inform the the consensual development of a realistic Strategic Plan</li> </ul>
<b>Political considerations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● All stakeholder groups need to be fully represented and commit to full participation</li> <li>● As Ministers are members of the Governing Board but are unlikely to be able to attend, ensure that they are replaced by mandated decision makers with an interest in the success of this project and the capacity to give input that will engage their superiors</li> <li>● The event should be given visibility and its proceedings should be conducted in as transparent a manner as possible</li> <li>● To the extent possible create opportunities for potential beneficiaries to be involved</li> </ul>
<b>Methodological principles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Participatory approach</li> <li>● Hands on work on the strategy development - developing ownership and motivation by giving participants the opportunity to contribute and develop something themselves <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ use active methods</li> <li>○ 'learning by doing'</li> <li>○ producing</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Start on a positive footing, avoid focus on solving the problems, concentrate on a new / alternative / positive / constructive and realistic ways for RYCO to deliver to young people and the people who work with them</li> <li>● Show and engage with thoughts and issues of young people as they express them</li> <li>● Work on the motivation of the different stakeholder groups to own the process and the result</li> <li>● Encourage participants to think of this as a holistic process that does not end with the 'writing of a document' - but as also contributing to their capacity development, as providing a framework within which the quality of cooperation between the participating countries can be enhanced, and within which youth participation, co-management can be fostered, etc</li> </ul>

<b>Proposed participants</b>	<p>Approx. 50 persons including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Governing Board</li> <li>● Advisory Board</li> <li>● Secretariat of HQ</li> <li>● Secretariats of Local Branches</li> <li>● Franco-German Youth Office / JCT</li> <li>● Key support institutions, donors, members of the international community supporting the RYCO initiative</li> </ul>
<b>Facilitation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● International youth sector expert and strategy consultant</li> <li>● 3 facilitators from the region with experience in the youth (policy) sector (different countries and language groups)</li> </ul>

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