

Trends and challenges in the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Bulgaria

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Abstract

As part of the European Union, Member States have access to significant funding to achieve sustainable development in social, economic and environmental aspect. Through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, countries have the opportunity to overcome the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis while at the same time achieving development in terms of digital transition, innovation, employment and climate neutrality. The present study aims to analyze the degree of implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Bulgaria, including main areas of funding, types of beneficiaries, number of contracts, etc. Among the research methods and approaches used are structural analysis, induction, method of comparison. The main results show that there is a serious delay in Bulgaria in terms of utilization of funds and fund flow, due to multiple macroeconomic factors, as well as an imbalance between priorities, beneficiaries and expected results.

Keywords: Recovery and resilience plan, European funding, economic development

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Introduction

In recent years, the world has faced numerous crises of various nature – health, political, military, etc. While political and military challenges have a predominantly territorial impact, the Covid-19 crisis has a widespread impact on all world economies. The main consequences can be found in the contraction of global markets, a decrease in business competitiveness, a deterioration in the social well-being of the population. In response, Europe is making efforts to help Member States quickly and purposefully regain their image and economic power through various measures, reforms, initiatives and financial mechanisms. It is the Recovery and Resilience Facility, as part of the NextGenerationEU instrument, that provides significant financial resources to EU countries to overcome the crisis. Access to financial resources is limited and is provided against the implementation of specific reforms and investment decisions, which countries should include in their Recovery and Resilience Plans and implement within predetermined deadlines. In addition to grants, loans are also provided to multiply the effect of investments on the countries' sustainable development. Despite the general focus of the required reforms, different countries manage to integrate the changes into their national policies and specific national characteristics in different ways. Accordingly, they manage to take advantage of the financial opportunity provided at different pace. In this regard, the aim of this paper is to reveal the main characteristics and scope of the Recovery and Resilience Plan of Bulgaria, to analyse its degree of implementation, including comparison with other Member States, and on this basis to derive basic recommendations for future more effective policies and actions. To achieve this, it is planned to carry out a brief overview of the scope and mode of operation of the Plan; to derive the main directions of the importance that the provided financing has for the development of the economy; to process information on the implementation of the Plan to the present, including analysis of the number of projects, amount of projects, types of beneficiaries, etc.; comparability with the degree of disbursements to other European countries; deriving main problems regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of the use of funds and pointing guidelines for their overcoming. The research methods and approaches used include analysis, synthesis, method of comparison, content analysis, etc.

1. Scope and main characteristics of Bulgaria's Recovery and Resilience Plan

The recovery and resilience plans of the EU Member States are valid for the period 2021-2026. They are developed in accordance with the European Union's overall strategy to address the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis and restore the balance of economies in social, economic and environmental aspects. The total budget for all EU countries under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is EUR 650 billion, of which EUR 359 billion in the form of grants and the remaining EUR 291 billion in the form of loans – debt financing. (European Commission. RRF, 2024). The reforms and investments envisaged for implementation integrate, on the one hand, the strategic priorities of the EU and, on the other hand, the specific characteristics of individual countries. In terms of strategic orientation, compliance is observed with the priorities of the EU Cohesion Policy, the European Green Deal, the Paper “Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030”, etc. In this regard, a targeted complementarity of the measures planned under the European Structural and Investment Funds and the European Shared Management Funds and building on the results is achieved, especially in terms of the pursuit of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. At the same time, certain differences are noted in the operation of the Funds, which can generally be attributed to their management style, priorities and scope. Contrary to traditional funds, the Recovery and Resilience Facility uses a new centralized management system, not relying as much on national and regional managing and auditing authorities to manage the programs, but rather concentrating implementation responsibility in Finance Ministries (Bokhorst & Corti, 2024). In some countries (Germany, Spain, Austria), a significant part of the funding provided is used primarily for projects that were planned in advance or for the continuation of those whose implementation started in previous periods, while other countries (Italy, Belgium, Portugal) launch the implementation of entirely new measures (Corti, F. et al., 2021). The specific characteristics of each Member State are also reflected in the reforms set to be implemented. Their implementation is in line with the operation and framework of the European Semester, the aim of which is the annual coordination of budgetary and economic policies between countries. The functioning of the European Semester is based on a periodic analysis of the economic and social situation of each country, as a result of which a national reform programme is developed.

Starting from 2024, the national reform programmes have been replaced by medium-term fiscal structural plans, which reflect the planned policies to strengthen employment, growth and achieve macroeconomic balance. The consistency between country-specific recommendations by European Semester and the planned reforms in their national recovery and resilience plans varies to some extent. For example, Portugal, Croatia, Slovakia and Spain achieve full integration of recommendations and planned reforms, while Italy, Belgium, etc. achieve this compliance partially (Zeitlin, Bokhorst, & Eihmanis, 2024). The recommendations to Bulgaria relating to the last European Semester, to be implemented in 2024 and 2025, are: 1) limiting the growth of net expenditure in 2025 to a rate consistent with maintaining the government budget deficit below 3% of gross domestic product, in line with the Stability and Growth Pact; 2) accelerating the implementation of programmes related to Cohesion policy and the recovery and resilience plan, including improving the functioning and capacity of public administration, the quality of public procurement procedures, strengthening the independence and functioning of regulators; 3) improving education and training, including for disadvantaged groups through teacher training and competence-based learning. In addition, attention should be paid to the skills of workers, the improvement of which is expected to impact on higher competitiveness and facilitate the transition to a green economy; 4) reducing dependence on fossil fuels and implementing a transition to clean (renewable) energy, including through the implementation of infrastructure solutions for the electricity grid, connectivity with neighbouring countries, increased storage capacity and addressing energy poverty. In addition, the implementation of sustainable urban and rail transport is also recommended (COM/2024/602, 2024).

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) covers four pillars of impact, respectively: Innovative Bulgaria, Green Bulgaria, Connected Bulgaria and Fair Bulgaria (NRRP, 2022). The “Innovative Bulgaria” envisages concentrating 25.3 % of the total financial resources for

the implementation of measures related to the development of knowledge, science, technology, research and innovation, digital skills and the connection between them. The specific measures are focused on three components: 1) Education and Skills, 2) Research and Innovation and 3) Smart Industry, with the first two relying on EU funding as well as national public co-financing, while the national co-financing of third one relies on private sources. Regarding the funding under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the largest share is allocated to Industry (component 3), at 11.58 %, followed by Education and skills development (component 1, 10.61 %). Only 3.06 % of the total amount is allocated to Research and innovation.

The "Green Bulgaria" pillar commits as much as 41.9 % of total European funding and includes investments and reforms also in three components: 1) Low-carbon economy; 2) Biodiversity and 3) Sustainable agriculture. It is precisely for the transition to a low-carbon economy that 37.79 % of the funding is focused, which should be supplemented by another approximately BGN 2 billion in private funding from Bulgarian beneficiaries. 3.38 % of the financial resources under the RRF are allocated to stimulate sustainable agriculture, and only 0.69 % to protect biodiversity.

Regarding the "Connected Bulgaria" pillar (18.3 % of the amount under the RRF), reforms and investments cover the development of digital connectivity, expansion of transport connectivity and local development. Of these, the largest support is foreseen in the field of transport (9.64 %); followed by funding for digitalization (5.57 %) and local development (3.05 %). Within transport and local development, national co-financing is mixed (public and private), while in digitalization it is only public.

The pillar with the lowest amount is "Fair Bulgaria" with 14.6% of the funds under the RRF, with the components "Business Environment" (2.94 %), "Social Inclusion" (6.37 %) and "Healthcare" (5.32 %). Mixed national funding is only available for social inclusion measures, while for the rest, Bulgaria's participation is entirely public.

Based on the information presented, the following major conclusions and summaries can be made: First, a key priority in Bulgaria's National recovery and resilience plan is the transition to a low-carbon economy, which also reflects the significant connection and dependence with the European Semester and the related recommendations to the country. Secondly, serious attention is paid to reforms in the field of education, skills and smart solutions for industry, and more specifically, these reforms are related to the modernization of educational infrastructure, the development of STEM centres, training for acquiring digital skills and adult learning, and economic transformation. Third, investments in biodiversity, the business environment, local development, and scientific research are given the lowest priority. Fourth, Bulgaria's total financial participation in the form of co-financing amounts to nearly BGN 7 billion, of which about 30 % is public and the remaining 70 % is private financing from the specific beneficiaries.

2. Implementation of Bulgaria's Recovery and Resilience Plan

Despite the fact that the funding under Recovery and Resilience Facility is gratuitous, Bulgaria is obliged to carry out the reforms and investments set out in the national plan within specific deadlines. The consequences of failure to comply with the set parameters are expressed in the loss of the assigned European funding. It is planned that the implementation of the commitments and, accordingly, receipt of financial assistance will take place in 9 stages/ instalments. There is a serious lag in the commitments made compared to the approved deadlines, with only those from the first stage being fully implemented. In fact, by December 2024, Bulgaria has only received the first instalment under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) in the amount of EUR 1 368 912 911 on 16.12.2022.

In comparison, a total of 12 EU countries are at the same stage in terms of payments, i.e. they have not yet received the second payment (Figure 1). In addition, 8 countries have received the third payment, 6 countries the fourth payment, and only 2 (Croatia and Italy) the fifth payment. Out of all

27 countries, 23 have received pre-financing, while the remaining 4, including Bulgaria, have not. The only country that has not request any payment by the end of 2024 is Sweden.

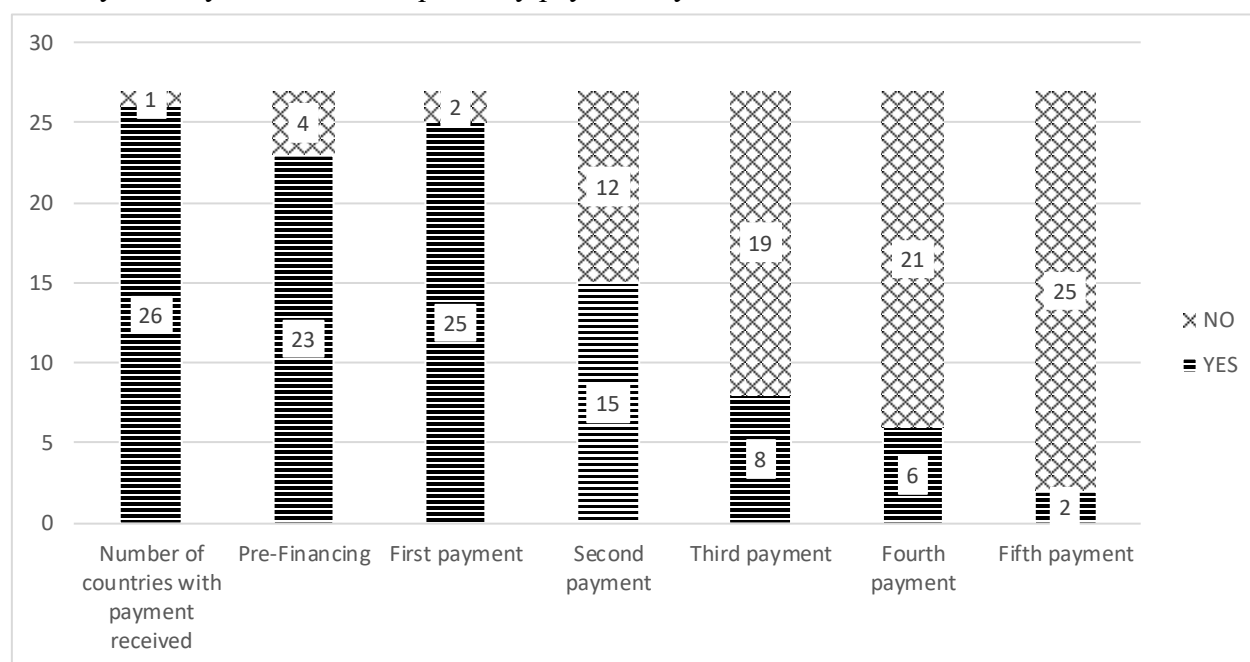


Figure 1. Number of EU Member States that received a corresponding payment under the Recovery and Resilience Facility by December 2024

Source: (European Commission. Disbursements, 2024)

The information presented in Table 1 shows that reforms that should have been reported as implemented at the end of 2022 are still lagging behind two years later. For the entire period of the NRRP, out of a total of 321 reforms and investment measures, 120 have been implemented as of December 2024, which is 37.38 %.

Table 1. Overall measure implementation of the Bulgaria's National Recovery and Resilience Plan by December 2024

Nº of Instalment	Initial amount (EUR)*	Reduced amount (EUR)	Deadline	Number of reforms set for implementation	Fulfilled reforms	Unfulfilled reforms
1	1 368 912 911	1 368 912 911	30.06.2022	22	22	0
2	724 039 480	653 151 273	31.12.2022	62	59	3
3	748 778 870	711 702 214	30.06.2023	46	17	29
4	611 887 578	521 644 766	30.12.2023	37	12	25
5	550 863 750	513 787 094	30.06.2024	26	4	22
6	631 679 090	523 714 227	31.12.2024	36	5	31
7	422 218 922	402 864 318	30.06.2025	16	1	15
8	604 465 761	425 612 691	31.12.2025	19	0	19
9	604 465 762	567 389 106	30.06.2026	57	0	57
Total	6 267 312 124	5 688 778 600	---	321	120	201

Source: (*Ref. Ares(2022)5576848 - 04/08/2022, 2022; UMIS 2020, 2024)

According to data from the Information System for Management and Monitoring of EU Funds in Bulgaria (UMIS 2020), for the full implementation of stage 2 it is necessary Bulgaria to adopt: 1) amendments to the regulatory framework regarding whistleblowing, which is within the competence

and responsibility of the Ministry of Justice; 2) entry into force of the Personal Bankruptcy Law with responsible institutions: the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Innovation and Growth, and 3) Reducing the share of public procurement contracts awarded on the basis of a single bidder with the Ministry of Finance and the Public Procurement Agency as responsible institutions (UMIS 2020, 2024). The necessary actions to secure the third payment (stage 3) are in the areas of: combating corruption; intelligent video surveillance systems in urban infrastructure sites; creating a national decarbonization fund; a strategy for geriatric care; creating a fund to stimulate a more balanced distribution of health professionals in the country; implementing various strategies in the field of outpatient medical care; amending the legislative framework of the National Culture Fund; legislation in the field of electric mobility, etc. The measures and reforms related to the subsequent stages are of a similar focus, with the responsible institutions including the National Employment Agency, the Social Assistance Agency, the Ministry of e-Government, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Ministry of Innovation and Growth, the Ministry of Justice, etc.

Despite the serious delay in deadlines, by December 2024 there was some progress in terms of absorption of funds by Bulgarian beneficiaries. The total number of funding contracts is 8629, of which 25.79 % are successfully completed; 52.13 % are in implementation; 17.90 % are concluded and are about to be launched; 4.15 % have been terminated prematurely and 0.03 % have been temporarily suspended (UMIS 2020 NRRP, 2024). Within the component (priority axis) "Education and Skills", the registered projects are 2455, of which 1 has been terminated and 2454 are in the process of implementation. The total amount of the projects amounts to BGN 3.39 billion, of which 100 % are grants. The actual disbursements by the end of 2024 are BGN 190 million. The type of beneficiaries is as follows: Ministries and state and municipal structures: 194 projects; educational institutions: 2261 projects.

Within the "Research and Innovation" component, there are 76 projects, of which 73 are in the process of implementation; 1 completed and 2 are at the "contracted" stage. The total value amounts to BGN 677 million, of which the planned co-financing by the beneficiaries is BGN 14.6 million. BGN 75 million have actually been paid. 5 of the projects have a beneficiary - Ministry/state administration; 59 are of educational institutions and scientific organizations, and 12 are of private companies.

Within the "Smart Industry" component, the registered projects as of December 2024 are 3450 in total, of which 874 are in the process of implementation; 2 temporarily suspended, 2224 completed and 350 terminated. The total amount of the projects is BGN 5.4 billion, of which BGN 2.4 billion is the beneficiaries' own contribution. The actual payments are BGN 467 million. Five of the projects have beneficiaries - representatives of the state administration; 3444 have beneficiaries - private organizations and 1 project has a beneficiary "European Investment Fund", related to the management of capital operations supported under the RRF.

In the field of low-carbon economy (component/priority axis 4), the number of projects amounts to 943, of which 1 is temporarily suspended, 941 is in implementation and 1 is terminated. The total value amounts to BGN 8.4 billion, and the amount of own co-financing is about BGN 2 billion. By December 2024, only BGN 50 million have actually been paid. In terms of the type of beneficiaries, 736 projects are of state and municipal administrations, 13 are of educational institutions and scientific organizations, incl. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; 206 are with beneficiaries - private organizations.

In the area of biodiversity (component 5), only one project has been registered, aimed at building a management structure for the Natura 2000 network, but it does not commit financial resources. Under component 6 "Sustainable Agriculture" 1546 projects have been registered, of which 5 are in implementation, 3 have been terminated and 1538 have the status "contracted". The total amount is BGN 1.6 billion, of which BGN 759 million is the beneficiaries' own contribution. Only BGN 37.9 million have actually been paid. The beneficiary of 3 of these projects is the Ministry

of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. The remaining 1543 projects (of which 3 have been terminated) have private companies, individuals and their associations as beneficiaries.

Within the component "Digital Connectivity" (component/priority axis 7), there are 4 projects with beneficiaries being state structures, with a total amount of BGN 782 million (100% grant funding), and the funds actually paid out are BGN 65.4 million. Within the framework of "Transport Connectivity", there are a total of 31 projects, of which 2 have been terminated. All beneficiaries are state structures - ministries, agencies or state-owned enterprises. The total value of the projects amounts to just over BGN 2 billion, of which BGN 143 million is the own financial contribution. BGN 355 million have actually been paid out.

Within the "Local Development" component, two projects are being implemented in the field of water supply and the water sector, and the beneficiaries are Bulgarian Water and Sewerage Holding EAD and the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, respectively. One of the projects does not involve financial resources, and the other is worth BGN 351 million, of which 51 million is the own financial contribution. There are no actual amounts paid.

Within the "Business Environment" component, there are a total of 22 projects, of which only one has been terminated. The beneficiaries are entirely state structures and institutions, with the majority of the projects related to strengthening the legal and judicial system. The total amount is about BGN 326 million (100% grant), and the actual amounts paid by December 2024 are BGN 84 million. Half of the indicated projects do not commit financial resources.

Regarding "Social Inclusion" (component 11), a total of 87 projects are being implemented, all of which have state and municipal structures as beneficiaries. The total amount is BGN 1.3 billion, and the own financial contribution is BGN 13.7 million. By December 2024, BGN 47 million have actually been paid. Within the last component "Healthcare", the beneficiaries of a total of 12 projects are the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior. The projects amount is BGN 590 million in total (100% grant), of which BGN 31.7 million are actually paid.

In summary, Table 2 presents information on the overall progress by pillars in implementing the NRRP in Bulgaria, according to the previously set parameters.

Table 2. Overall progress of the Bulgaria's National Recovery and Resilience Plan by pillars (December 2024)

Pillars	Number of projects (share, %)	Total amount (share, %)	Grants (share, %)	Actual amounts paid (share, %)	Planned financing (share, %)*
Innovative Bulgaria	69,31 %	38,15 %	36,29 %	52,17 %	25,3 %
Green Bulgaria	28,86 %	40,30 %	37,26 %	6,27 %	41,9 %
Connected Bulgaria	0,43 %	12,62 %	15,12 %	29,96 %	18,3 %
Fair Bulgaria	1,40 %	8,93 %	11,33 %	11,60 %	14,6 %

Source: Author's calculations based on data from UMIS 2020 (UMIS 2020 NRRP, 2024) and NRRP* (NRRP, 2022)

The presented information shows that 69 % of the projects that have been completed or are in the process of implementation are in the area of the "Innovative Bulgaria" pillar, and nearly 29 % are in the area of "Green Bulgaria". Compared to the planned funding according to NRRP, the two mentioned areas have a significantly higher budget, but nevertheless "Green Bulgaria" is the leader with 41.9 % of the planned European funding. In this regard, there is a noticeable real implementation focused more on education, training and innovation than on the transition to a low-carbon economy, biodiversity and sustainable agriculture. This is also confirmed by actual funds disbursed by December 2024 – 52 % are for projects in the "Innovative Bulgaria" pillar and only 6.27 % are for

"Green Bulgaria". However, there is a relatively coordinated financing of projects by pillars regarding their shares given as percent of total amounts. The pillar with the largest share of actual contracted grants is "Green Bulgaria" (37.26 %), followed by the "Innovative Bulgaria" pillar (36.29 %), "Connected Bulgaria" (15.12 %) and "Fair Bulgaria" (11.3 %). The pillars are ranked in the same way according to their share given as percent of total approved European funding under the RRF, although with greater differentiation between the first two areas of reform.

3. Main results and recommendations for improving performance in implementation of Bulgaria's National Recovery and Resilience Plan

Obviously, the Recovery and Resilience Facility provides significant financial resources to Member States to support their recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. Among the main areas of financed reforms and investments are the green transition; digital transformation; smart, sustainable and inclusive growth; social and territorial inclusion; economic, social and territorial recovery and policies aimed at the next generations. For the purposes of accessing the financial resource, Bulgaria is committed to implement a total of 321 reforms for the period 2022-2026, with a serious delay from the initial plan for their real implementation and the corresponding absorption of funds by the end of 2024. In the remaining time, the recommendations for the country can be outlined in the following directions:

First, priority should be given to the implementation of the remaining measures and reforms from stage 2 and stage 3, which will guarantee the second and third instalments. Of course, work should be done also on the implementation of the remaining stages and, where there is complementarity between the reforms, integrated solutions should be sought in order to optimize the performance. The main challenge to achieving this is the lack of a regular government in recent years, which hinders work on the development and adoption of draft laws in various areas.

Second, with regard to the projects being implemented, it is necessary to balance the policy of verification of funds and their disbursement to the final beneficiaries with a view to their proportional distribution in relation to the previously approved funding by directions/pillars. The lack of proportionality is a prerequisite for subsequent disapproval of the implementation reports by the European Commission, the consequences of which could arise either in terms of premature termination of already launched projects or in the need for another change in the parameters of the plan. The option of increasing the amount of national co-financing in order to complete the reforms and policies already initiated is not excluded.

Third, in continuation of the previous recommendation, it is necessary to activate payments under the "Low Carbon Economy" and "Sustainable Agriculture" components, as part of the "Green Bulgaria" pillar.

Fourth, for the effective implementation of future measures and to catch up with the reported delay, it is necessary to engage additional expert capacity in order to conduct periodic and in-depth analyses of the absorption of funds compared to those planned, the results of which should be used to prioritize the most urgent reforms for implementation. It is undeniable that upgrading and complementarity with the funding provided by the European Shared Management Funds should be sought, but expert decisions should be made separately for the two sources of funding in order to prevent the loss of already approved amounts.

Fifth, a possible solution for more effective implementation of the measures is the creation of a network of regional units similar to the district information points, which would provide adequate and timely support to individual beneficiaries with a focus and exceptional expertise on the operation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, the European Union has made serious efforts to achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion of regions and individual Member States through various instruments, funds, strategies and policies. This includes the Recovery and Resilience Facility, whose action in

sync with the European Semester aims, on the one hand, to restore the economy of the Union after the Covid crisis and, on the other hand, to achieve a transition to a circular economy and sustainable development with the prosperity of future generations in mind. In this context, Bulgaria has the opportunity to make significant investments in many sectors of economic and social life, but a number of macroeconomic factors, mainly from the political and legal environments, make it difficult to achieve these goals. Based on the information presented, there is a need for urgent action to implement the commitments made to the European Commission in order to prevent the loss of grant funds and achieve the desired level of competitiveness of the national economy. The success is expected to be based on knowledge, skills, new technological solutions and social well-being, both in relation to current and future generations.

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