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**OPEN SOURCE INTELLIGENCE IN THE ERA
OF DIGITALIZATION: CONNECTING THE DOTS
BETWEEN INTELLIGENCE GATHERING
AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE PRESENCE IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT OF THE INSTITUTIONS WITH A ROLE IN ENSURING NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract:

The coronavirus pandemic surprised the entire planet and caused changes in everyone's lifestyle. In many areas it took inventiveness to keep the situation afloat. The online environment became the main means of communication during the period when social distance became compulsory. In addition to communication, in many areas, the online environment has become the only possibility of carrying out activities. Areas such as education, culture and the economy have minimized physical interaction and adapted the activities to the online environment.

National security institutions have also adapted to the use of the online environment to keep the population informed in the pandemic context. Social networks are the most widely used information tools of this period. If, until the beginning of the state of emergency, social networks were used by these institutions to some extent, the switch to online has led to an increased public presence in the virtual environment of institutions with a role in ensuring national security.

Through this study, using content analysis, we will show whether and how much the pandemic has changed the work of national security institutions on social networks. The pandemic brought a wave of information to social media, and those who aimed to maintain a balance realized that they had to be present online. Perhaps this would have been necessary, regardless of the pandemic. Digital natives would have prompted a change in the way activities were carried out. We can say that the pandemic has just hastened things.

Keywords: *pandemic, national security, social media, online, information.*

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Introduction

Social networks are part of our lives. They are used in various activities, both in private and professional life. The pandemic caused by the coronavirus has led to an increase in the number of activities carried out with the help of social networks. Social distancing has forced people to find alternatives to stay connected without being physically next to each other. This has led to an increased use of social networks.

Although Romania was not technologically ready for a rapid transition to the online environment, things have evolved and there are now more and more activities that can be carried out successfully online. Given the fact that this pandemic involved a change in the way of life worldwide, all institutions, state or private, have adapted so that they are close to the population, and the most widely used tool for achieving this objective has been social networks.

The change was also accepted by the institutions that have a role in ensuring national security. The uncertainty caused by the pandemic has led to the adaptation of the work of these institutions to inform the public correctly and prevent the emergence of other threats to national security.

Through this study we aim to establish how the coronavirus pandemic has altered the online activity of national security institutions. We hypothesize that *the pandemic has led to a higher presence of these institutions online*. To achieve the objective, we will analyse the official Facebook pages of state institutions responsible for ensuring national security in Romania during 2020 and carry out a quantitative analysis of the number of posts each month.

Certainly, the coronavirus pandemic has permanently changed everyone's lifestyle and the end of it will most likely not involve a return to the life before the pandemic because some changes will become the normality of our lives. Ideally, we should be able to identify those aspects that have had a positive impact on our lifestyle and continue with them, but also to give up those that have had a negative impact.

Study methodology

To achieve the proposed objective, we will use content analysis as a research method. This method “represents a qualitative-quantitative method of studying communication, but not only of its manifest content, but also of the latent one.” (Chelcea, 2001). We will use content analysis to determine the evolution of the presence of institutions providing national security on social networks in 2020. The objective of the study is to identify the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in the online activity carried out by these institutions.

We will start by identifying them and then we will continue with the presentation of the defining aspects of the institutions. To achieve the proposed objective, it is necessary to establish the hierarchy of the institutions, depending on their popularity in the online environment. We will also pay attention to the number of employees in each institution because this number can also influence their popularity on social networks.

The final step in this research will be to carry out a quantitative analysis of the online activity undertaken by each institution. To achieve this, we will initially determine which social network is most widely used among these institutions. We will then quantify the number of posts from 2020 on the most popular social network.

Social networks in national security institutions

According to Burgess and al., social networks can be defined as “those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication and interpersonal connection” (Burgess, Marwick și Poell 2018). This definition underlines the main facilities offered by social networks in carrying out activities: the possibility of sharing information in a short time to many people; the ability to communicate very easily and quickly and establish a connection between people.

Manning believes that the definition of social networks is based on two characteristics common to all social networks: participation and interaction. Participation refers to the fact that, to benefit from what social networks offer, it is necessary to create a profile in order to leave

anonymity and to give up the mere observation of information. Interaction involves connecting users, whether they are close people, relatives, friends, or people who know each other through social networks. Therefore, social networks are the way people communicate with each other, transmit information and build relationships (Manning, 2014).

The most used social networks in October 2020, according to the information found on Statista, are: Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat and Instagram (Tankovska, 2020). The hierarchy was made according to the number of active users. In that situation there were other social networks, among which we mention: TikTok, Snapchat, QQ, Pinterest, and Telegram.

The largest social network was and continues to be Facebook. It was launched in 2004. Since then, it has been used by billions of people around the world. In early 2009, it was declared the most widely used social network in the world. The next moment to demonstrate Facebook's popularity was in mid-2010, when Google announced that Facebook social network was the most visited platform in the world in May 2010 (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011).

Given the fact that Facebook is the most widely used social network, we will conduct our research on the Facebook pages of the identified institutions. Facebook is used both at the individual and the organizational level. As defined, it is a social network used for communication, people's connection, and information sharing. Facebook is also used for promotion, sales, recruitment, etc. More and more activities are being carried out with the help of Facebook. In 2016 a research was carried out which established the activities that can be performed using social networks: "broadcast, dialogue, collaboration, knowledge management and sociability" (Schlagwein & Hu, 2016). This research covers approximately all activities taking place online, via social networks.

With the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, the online became indispensable in many other areas. If, until the start of the pandemic, social networks had a decisive role in activities such as promotion, recruitment and communication, from March 2020 onwards, social networks became an integral part of areas such as education, artistic activities, banking activities and almost all areas that

enable remote activities to take place. Even activities that, before the pandemic, seemed impossible to take place online, were successfully adapted. These activities include fitness, concerts, and visiting museums. Activities adapted to the pandemic context have been carried out in each area. People have been looking for solutions to make them resist the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

The category of institutions that have adopted the Facebook method for promotion includes state institutions that provide national security. According to Law No. 51/1991 on the national security of Romania, Article 6, paragraph: 1, "State bodies responsible for national security are: Romanian Intelligence Service (RIS), Foreign Intelligence Service (FIS), Protection and Guard Service (PGS), as well as the Ministry of National Defence (MND), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and Ministry of Justice (MJ), through specialized internal structures" (Law No. 51/1991 , 1991). All these institutions have official Facebook accounts. The role of these accounts is to promote the institution and also help the institution to be closer to the citizens. Some organizations pay more attention to social networks, while others do not consider them necessary. The use of these social networks in the field of security is determined by the need of the institutions to be close to citizens to carry out their tasks.

Results

To be able to rank institutions with national security responsibilities, depending on the work they do on the Facebook page, we will consider the number of employees in each institution. We believe that online popularity is influenced by the number of employees, assuming that they are interested in following the Facebook profile of their institution.

According to the list published by the Ministry of Public Finance in September 2020, **MIA** has 125,973 employees, **MND** has 75,292 employees, **MJ** has 16,625 employees and **PGS** has 1,410 employees. Therefore, depending on the number of employees, the hierarchy we have established, based on official data, is found in Figure 1. We have not been able to introduce RIS and FIS into this hierarchy because, by

the nature of their work, the number of employees cannot be disclosed. Since the number of employees is an important aspect in establishing the online popularity of certain institutions, we will take this into account, even if we have not identified the data for all the institutions concerned.

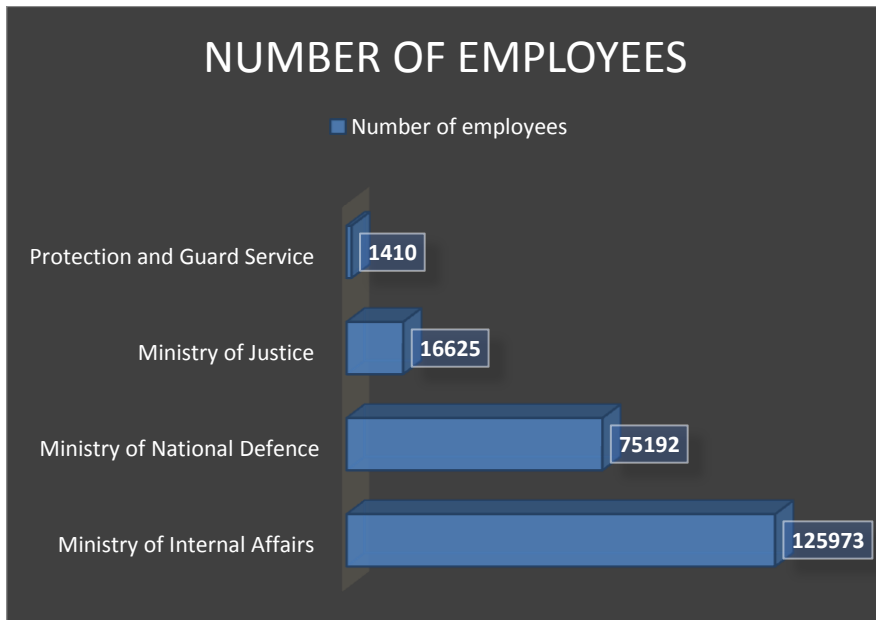


Figure 1: Number of employees

All institutions with national security responsibilities from Romania have official pages on the Facebook platform, pages that are easily identified by the name of the institution. This social network offers its users the opportunity to choose certain aspects related to privacy. Users can decide whether the profile created will be public or private. The public profile can be viewed by anyone, whether they are friends on Facebook or not. Instead, the private profile can only be viewed by users who are in the friends list.

The Facebook pages of these institutions are public, so we had access to the shared posts. The next step was to establish a hierarchy of

institutions, depending on the number of followers and the number of likes on Facebook pages. These two indicators are designed to determine the online popularity of a profile. The result is illustrated in Figure 2. MIA is the institution with the most followers on the Facebook page and at the opposite pole is FIS, with the fewest followers.

Followers of a social media profile show the impact that profile has on the online environment and the likes suggest that the impact is positive for the profile followers. That is why we considered it necessary to identify the number of followers and the number of likes that the official Facebook pages of the institutions we are looking at have. From Figure 2, we can see that the number of likes is directly proportional to the number of followers of each page. Those who follow a particular profile, often, do so because they are interested and because they appreciate that profile. Therefore, the two numbers are directly proportional.

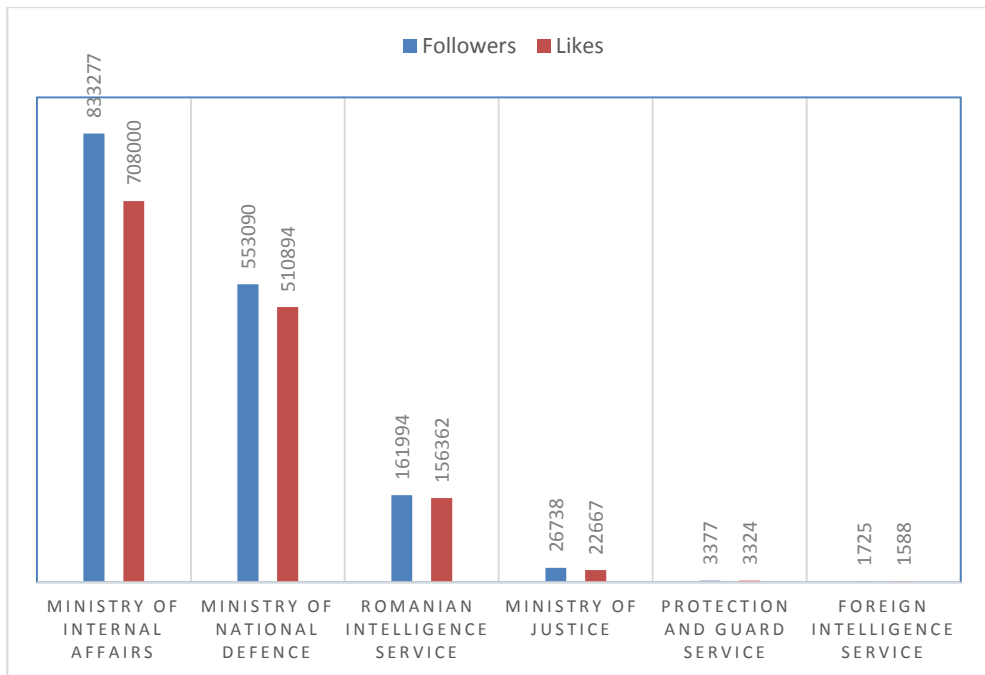


Figure 2: Online popularity of institutions that play a role in ensuring national security

Looking at the two figures, we can observe that the number of employees is directly proportional to the number of posts and the number of likes of Facebook pages. This is somewhat normal because most employees follow the Facebook page of the institution they work for. Although the intelligence services, for security reasons, do not provide official data on the number of employees, we can support the above claim based on data obtained from the other institutions.

The period we will have in our analysis will be the full year 2020. To observe the evolution of the institutions' activity on Facebook, we will set the 2020 limit in four time periods during which we will analyse the time-interval posts: January – February (pre-pandemic period); March – May (state of emergency); June – September (relaxation of restrictions) and October – December (introduction of new restrictions). We believe that these are the periods of 2020 relevant to our research because they are the periods during which there have been major changes related to the evolution of the pandemic. We believe that these are the 2020 intervals relevant to our research because they are marked by major changes that have occurred because of the evolution of the pandemic.

MIA

MIA is the institution within the national security system with the highest number of employees. Following the research carried out on the Facebook page of this institution we have identified the data presented in Figure 2. In the pre-pandemic period, activity on the Facebook page was the lowest. During the state of emergency, the number of posts increased considerably, the first month being the month with the most posts. Exiting the state of emergency and relaxing restrictions led to a decrease in activity on the MIA's Facebook page. With September, the month in which new restrictions were introduced, the activity on Facebook was intensified. Since then, the number of posts has been steadily increasing. This is the period during which MIA paid the most attention to the official Facebook page.

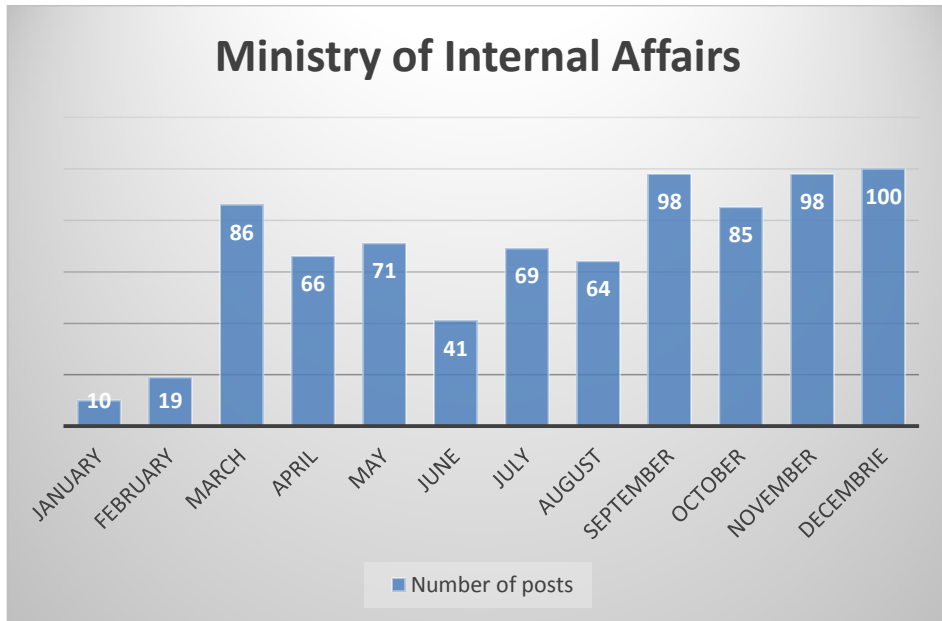


Figure 3: Presence of MIA on Facebook in 2020

MND

The situation of the posts on the official MND page in 2020 is illustrated in Figure 4. In the pre-pandemic period, there was the lowest activity on the Facebook page, followed by the period of restrictions imposed by the pandemic. During the state of emergency, the number of posts shared by MND increased. The period in which most posts were distributed is the period October – December. This was the period in which the number of cases of COVID-19 infections increased, leading to the imposition of new restrictions at the national level. Since September, MND has increased the number of posts distributed on Facebook.

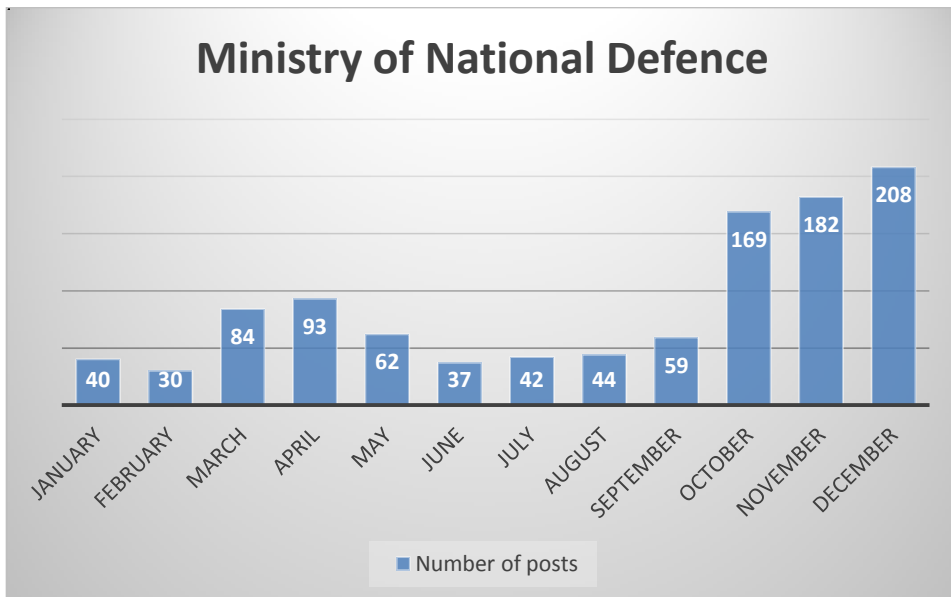


Figure 4: MND presence on Facebook in 2020

RIS

RIS does not have a large activity on the official Facebook page. The maximum number of posts in a month is 5 and the minimum number 1. So, there is no month without a shared post, but, anyway, not at the level that MAI and MND are at. In Figure 5, it can be seen that the most intense activity on RIS's Facebook page took place during the period when there were restrictions imposed by the pandemic: March-May and October-December, and the lowest activity took place in the pre-pandemic period and between June and September, when certain restrictions were lifted.

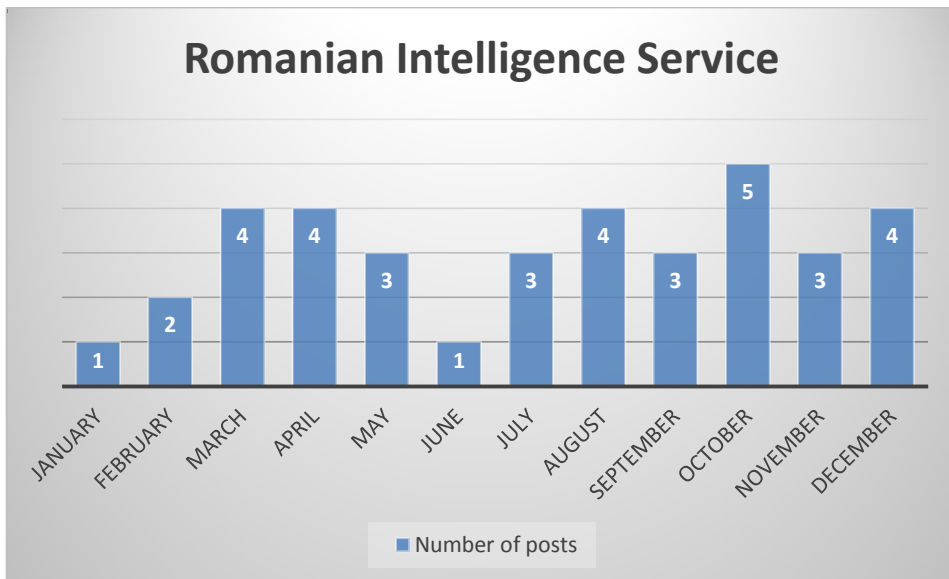


Figure 5: RIS presence on Facebook in 2020

Ministry of Justice

The analysis of the work carried out by MJ on the Facebook page is illustrated in Figure 6. This institution ranks after MND and MAI in terms of the intensity of activity on Facebook. In the pre-pandemic period, MJ's online activity was incredibly low. The establishment of the state of emergency led to an increase in the work carried out by this institution on the official Facebook page. Then, during the summer, when certain restrictions were lifted, a slight decrease was seen in the activity on Facebook of this institution. The last period of the year led to an increase in posts shared by MJ. However, the differences between the 4 periods related to posts shared by MJ on Facebook are not so significant. The biggest difference is between the pre-pandemic period and all other periods.

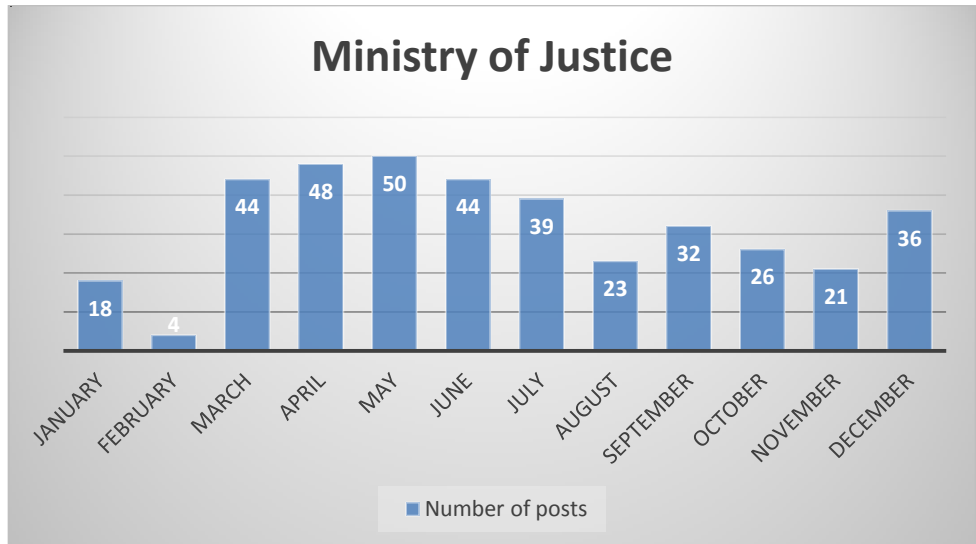


Figure 6: MJ's presence on Facebook in 2020

Although they have official Facebook pages, FIS and PGS did not use this method of communication in 2020. The last post shared by FIS was in 2017, and the last post shared by PGS was in 2014. For these two institutions, the coronavirus pandemic was not a trigger regardless the activity on Facebook page.

An important aspect that we can see from the work carried out on Facebook by MIA and MND is that although MIA has more employees, more followers on the Facebook page and more likes on this page, MND distributes several posts on Facebook, ranking MIA 2nd in the top presence on Facebook. The next institution, after MIA, is MJ and in 4th place is RIS. Regarding MJ and RIS, we do not have data to confirm that the order we have established is real.

Conclusions

Looking at the activity on the Facebook page of all institutions that have a role in ensuring national security, we can see that they have the same trajectory. The event that prompted the change in Facebook activity in 2020 was the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. The

restrictions have led to activities moving online and we can say this at a time when the lifting of certain restrictions has led to a decrease in the number of Facebook posts. The introduction of new restrictions has also led to an increase in online activity. So, we validated the hypothesis of this study.

Our study has tracked the evolution of the Facebook activity of institutions with a role in ensuring national security from a quantitative point of view. We consider this to be a limitation of the research because a qualitative analysis would also be useful. We have shown that several posts were distributed in the months when more restrictions were imposed but analysing the content of these posts would be a research direction to identify how the coronavirus pandemic changed the activity on the Facebook pages of these institutions.

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