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When Do Reconciliation and Cooperation Matter?
Polish-German lessons for the West and Russia

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When Do Reconciliation and Cooperation Matter? Polish-German lessons for the West and Russia

In 2015 we are celebrating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two, the conflict which cost the lives of somewhere between 40 and 60 million people worldwide. WWII began on September 1st, 1939 with Germany's attack on Poland¹. Both countries were involved in battles during the entirety of the war. Poland lost over 5 million inhabitants, including 2.7 million Jews who were Polish citizens. Germany also suffered heavy damage. 1.2 million civilians died in direct consequence of acts of war, whilst 5.2 million German soldiers perished in the Nazi cause. Both Poland and Germany lost important parts of their material cultural heritage during the conflict. The Yalta decision to change the borders of the Soviet Union, Poland, and Germany meant that further millions were uprooted and lost their homelands, adding another dimension of long-term resentment between the Polish and German citizens.

The feeling of guilt was not immediately evident amongst Germans after the conclusion of the war. The first significant German step on the path towards reconciliation with Poles dates to the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. A German Christian organization called "Action Reconciliation. Service for Peace" took the first significant step in rebuilding Polish-German relations. The groundbreaking moment for Polish-German reconciliation occurred at the end of the Second Vatican Council, which was an important response by the Catholic Church to postwar reality. It was here that Polish Bishops decided in favor of a controversial gesture to their German counterparts. Poles prepared a Pastoral Letter with the famous summons, "We forgive and ask for forgiveness," in which they absolved Germany of crimes committed during World War II and proposed the rebuilding of Polish-German relations. The most controversial part of this decision was asking forgiveness from "former assassins". Most Poles, including the communist leaders of the post-war state, were shocked by this phrase and viewed such a term as essentially an outright anti-Polish statement made by representatives of the Polish Church. Symbolic also was the lack of a direct and important answer on an equally high political and moral level from the German Catholic Church for many years. That only strengthened the sense of misunderstanding.

We witnessed a similar controversial reaction from the German side when in December 1970 German chancellor Willy Brandt took two enormous steps towards Polish-German reconciliation. Brandt, who was himself a staunch opponent of Nazism, assumed – as a German – the gravity of the crimes brought about by the system he had fought against, and noted the geopolitical consequences for Germany of losing the war, including an acceptance of Germany's Oder-Neisse border with Poland. During his official visit in Warsaw, Brandt made the most symbolic gesture of the Polish-German reconciliation process: Brandt's kneeling in front of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw symbolized the complexity of the relationship not only between Germans and Jews but also between Germans and Poles. That snapshot will forever depict the iconic political and moral bravery of Willy Brandt.

¹ On September 17th, 1939 Soviet Union also attacked Poland as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (also known as the Hitler-Stalin Pact).

The Letter of Reconciliation from the Polish Bishops to the German Bishops, Brandt's recognition of the Polish-German border at the Oder-Neisse line, and his kneeling in front of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw have been cornerstones of Polish-German reconciliation and will underlie future cooperation. Poland and Germany have already played very constructive roles in abolishing communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe and have been stabilizers of post-Cold War Europe. Germany played a major role in advocating Poland's EU ambitions, and since the "Big Bang" enlargement in May 2004 Berlin and Warsaw have come to be seen as two of the most stable points of the post-crisis European Union.

Moreover, grassroots economic, political, scientific, and cultural cooperation between the countries has flourished to such an extent that neither the Polish nor the German government can provide an exact number of all the bilateral initiatives.

I argue that the Polish-German miracle of reconciliation and cooperation could be an important inspiration and model for the West and the Russian Federation in rebuilding their relationship after the serious geopolitical clash between both sides in February and March 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, which had been part of Ukraine. Conflicts of values and interests along with a disparate understanding of the postwar world order contributed heavily to the breakdown of relations between the West and Russia. Looking forward, the Polish-German case can illustrate the challenges that will be faced in the future, and highlight where Americans, Europeans and Russians have to do further homework to promote the reconciliation process.

The Polish-German case demonstrates that **political vision**² is the first key element for successful reconciliation. There are many examples of how big dreams and projects contributed to further cooperation. The European Union, itself a highly successful product of a grand vision, is an example of the long-term ramifications of true bravery and political courage. So was the vision of 1989, when Poland regained its sovereignty and Germany took its initial steps towards reunification. The actions of the Polish bishops and Willy Brandt must take their place as similarly significant examples of political courage supporting a grand vision. On the basis of those pioneering actions, Polish and German political elites soon realized that their strategic goals could only be achieved by strong bilateral cooperation and the establishment of a German-Polish tandem for the coming years. Cooperation between German and Polish anti-communist opposition, the support of the Federal Republic of Germany for Solidarity in the eighties, the mutual Polish-German assistance during the Revolutions of 1989, German support for Poland's NATO and EU ambitions, and the tremendous advocacy of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, helped Poland rejoin the Western world. Since the "big bang" EU enlargement, Poland and Germany have played constructive roles in reshaping the Union into a new political reality. During the current economic crisis German Chancellor Angela Merkel has collaborated closely with Polish prime minister Donald Tusk in implementing necessary financial reform for the EU.

There is an open question regarding the potential role of political vision in overcoming the current crisis between the West and Russia. Russian president Vladimir Putin categorically denies Russia is involved in events in Eastern Ukraine. Western politicians cannot agree with this

² In the following policy paper I use 5 ingredients of successful reconciliation which are the result of Lily Gardner Feldman's research. Cf. Gardner Feldman, Lily. *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation. From Enmity to Amity*. Plymouth, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.

assertion and continue to support sanctions imposed on Russia, both those that are based on the Western understanding of Russian actions in Eastern Ukraine and those in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea. There is no vision of a way out of the current crisis anywhere on the horizon. One of the main problems is that past Western and Russian visions of close cooperation have been deemed tactical or feigned. In 2009, during his historic speech in Prague, President Barack Obama proposed to a global audience, especially to Russia, a world without nuclear weapons. The same year, Vladimir Putin, in an open letter to Poles published in the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, proposed a new "beginning" in Polish-Russian relations based on mutual understanding and collaboration. Six years later, in the current climate, this approach seems to have been scrapped.

The second important factor for our analysis is the role of political **leadership** in the reconciliation process. Not only does leadership involve pushing one's party or country to victory, but it also constitutes taking unpopular, difficult, and often controversial decisions. The two main actors in the reconciliation process between Poland and Germany, the Polish bishops and Willy Brandt, are considered to have been leaders in this process, as they stood contrary to the prevailing opinion of their societies. Poles, who still had memories of the World War II hecatomb, were outraged by the words of the bishops asking that the Germans forgive Poles. Likewise, Willy Brandt's recognition of the Oder-Neisse border meant denying the hopes of millions of his countrymen who wanted to return to their lost homelands. These gestures of political courage bore fruit in the subsequent history of reconciliation.

Just as there is an absence of political vision for overcoming the crisis between the West and Russia, at present there appears to be no leadership on this issue. None of the major politicians in Washington, Brussels, and Moscow have been able to take the initiative to defuse the current crisis. European attempts to mediate between Obama's and Putin's administrations have been reduced to negotiating the Minsk agreements based on ceasefires, which – as we know – are routinely violated, and which are hardly the solution to the underlying conflicts.

The West and Russia have little or no mutual, overlapping historical memory. This has made problematic the construction of a **platform of sincere historical discussion**, which is a third factor of successful reconciliation. Berlin's and Warsaw's views on the democratic changes in 1989 and 1991 differ completely from Moscow's current perspective. For Poles and Germans, the collapse of the communist regimes meant the return of freedom and reunification and restoration of the right to self-determination, while an important part of the Russian political elites recognize the collapse of the Soviet Union as (in Putin's words) "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century."

Even bigger differences can be found in the perceived truths about World War II. As Adam Daniel Rotfeld explained in his lecture, "European values and the search for identities" Poles identify themselves as victims and Germans feel a sense of guilt, while Russians view this catastrophic historical event as their great victory over Nazism. For this reason, it would very hard to build a common approach towards a fair and honest understanding of history.

Our collective imagination of reconciliation is shaped by **symbols**. They are the fourth component in the process under discussion. The "We forgive and ask for forgiveness" quote from the Letter of Reconciliation of the Polish Bishops to the German Bishops, the picture of Willy

Brandt kneeling in front of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw, Tadeusz Mazowiecki's and Helmut Kohl's hug during mass of reconciliation in Krzyzowa in 1989, Roman Herzog's speech in Warsaw on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising with the final words: „I ask for forgiveness for what has been done to you by Germans”, touching addresses made by Wladyslaw Bartoszewski in 1995 and Bronislaw Geremek in 2002 in the German Bundestag, Gerhard Schröder's tribute to the Warsaw Uprising during the 60th anniversary of that event – these symbols provide a visual image of the process of Polish-German reconciliation in which the complexity of the mutual history of both nations is clearly evident. Symbols also help us to make references that we can carry forward and can be easily used in speeches, classes, presentations, seminars, bilateral conversations, etc., to recapture a mood of cooperation and closeness.

In terms of Western-Russia reconciliation, such symbols are not forthcoming. Obviously, there were examples of the construction of such symbols during the Cold War – such as the meeting of American and Soviet soldiers on the Elbe – but they did not take root in the collective consciousness. The same situation applies to the period of the last quarter century. It is hard to recall even one symbol of brotherhood between the Western world and Russia or other former Soviet states.

Some experts believe that there is one potential symbol for the collective historical identity shared by Russians, Americans, and Europeans: the graves of allied soldiers who died in battle against German Nazism. However, while the graves of Americans in Normandy are treated today as a sacred place of freedom, the same cannot be said about those graves of Red Army soldiers in the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In regions of Central and Eastern Europe there is a common opinion that “They did not bring us freedom, because they did not have it.” Without the settlement of all the crimes under Stalinism, where many lives have been lost within Russia itself as well, a common narrative of reconciliation may not be built on the basis of the enormous bloodshed resulting from war in the last century.

The fifth and final factor to bear in mind is **institutional support for the reconciliation process**. There are just a few major organizations, including the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation, the Polish-German Youth Partnership, the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation, the Polish-German Foundation for Science, which assist in the development of bilateral cooperation, continuously contributing to reconciliation between Poles and Germans. Experience shows that professional and financial support is crucial to building mutual understanding. Poles and Germans meet among themselves as neighbors to exchange thoughts, opinions, and ideas. It is now considered normal – it is even hard to remember when it was not – to build friendships through common projects, seminars, meetings, cultural events, etc.

The weakness of institutional cooperation between the West and Russia lies in the lack of cooperation among countries and organizations in the Western world. There are certain youth and expert exchange programs between the U.S./EU and Russia, but these are hampered by logistical considerations such as visa problems. Moreover, in the European Union there are large asymmetries in cooperation. For many reasons, German-Russian collaboration is on a higher level than, e.g., Polish-Russian cooperation. Furthermore, Russia does not conduct multifaceted and wide-ranging cooperation with the Western world. Even before the crisis in Ukraine, there

was a much larger American presence in Russian universities and think tanks, and relatively fewer experts from the EU. Since the crisis, both forms of exchange have been cut drastically.

As can be seen, the current probable outlook for a reconstruction of the relationship between the West and Russia is extremely limited. It is also worth noting that since the end of World War II, a true and honest reconciliation has never taken place. Consequently, the current conflict can be an important tool for the Western world and Russia to begin this difficult process. There are certain opinions circulating that it is currently too early to start a dialogue with Russian authorities, but building a secure world requires action now.

The keys for the rebuilding process are mutual empathy and efforts to understand each other. Both American and European elites have to revise their outlooks on Russia and admit their own mistakes and failures. This involves, above all, an admission of the many mistakes committed by the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Advising, and occasionally forcing emerging countries to implement economic "shock therapy" based on neoliberal ideology led to the demolition of the post-socialist "welfare state" and the rapid degradation of the standard of living for millions of Russians. The newly established states had very weak administrative structures and were characterized by a lack of social capital. The radical version of the free market led to the destruction of these fragile structures, and consequently there was an "oligarchization" of the Russian and other post-Soviet economy and politics. Since these developments were associated with democratic movements, the idea of democracy was devalued in Russia and in other parts of the former Soviet Union. Political freedom became associated with anarchy, social Darwinism and a feeling of economic uncertainty. The popularity of Vladimir Putin has grown under the slogans of stability, predictability, and respect for Russia in the international arena. The lack of democratic aspirations among the broader population is a direct consequence of the neoliberal reforms that Western countries advised Russia to carry out, while maintaining a welfare-state environment at home.

Russia, too, must change its understanding of the Western world. The right to conduct sovereign, democratic politics is a value in itself and cannot be subject to negotiation. Ukraine's right to join the Western world must not be subject to dispute by anyone but Ukrainians themselves. The public's disagreement with the authorities is not a sign of a weakness of the state, but actually symbolizes its maturity. Freedom of the media is likewise a sign of maturity, and Russia should accept that in the West it will be protected, and not attacked by the government. Similarly, Western acceptance of non-standard sexual orientations does not imply moral corruption but tolerance and political maturity. Western courts are independent, and prosecutors are not political tools. The fact that these values are not currently shared in full in Russia does not mean that Russia should disparage the sincerity with which they are held in the West, or that Russia should believe these values are a cynical tool with which to impose Western domination upon the international order.

Only by finding common ground for dialogue and mutual respect can we begin rebuilding political economics and social relations between the West and Russia, whilst bearing in mind all the factors influencing the process that we are evaluating in this analysis.

Russia and the West will have to work together in the future to address the common threats that face them, just as Poland and Germany have. The threat from terrorism, the so-called Islamic

State, the rise of China and India, migration, and technological and climate change will certainly be determinants of Western-Russian cooperation.

Especially in the issue of climate change, Russia is in dire need of American and European know-how. The Russian economy is still archaic, rooted in the 20th century, based on the extraction of raw materials rather than on the production of highly developed technology. Russia is also one of the world's largest polluters. The transition to renewable energy is only a matter of time. Without Europe's help, it will be much more expensive and difficult for Russian authorities.

These factors could affect mutual political and economic benefits. A "win-win" situation is possible, and Poland's and Germany's roles in shaping such a reality are crucial from a long-term perspective.

Poland and Germany are considered key players in the European Union and the West in terms of Eastern policy. Since 2004 former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski has been trusted as an advisor to senior officials in Washington, Brussels and Berlin on Russian and Ukrainian policy. During the "Orange Revolution" Kwasniewski played a crucial role in finding a compromise among Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yanukovych, and Viktor Yushchenko after fraudulent presidential elections. The Ukrainian mission of Kwasniewski with Pat Cox in 2012 and 2013 was another symbol of the recognition of Kwasniewski's role and knowledge about Eastern Europe. Poland and Sweden secured German support for the Eastern Partnership project of the European Union in 2009. In 2011 the first Eastern Partnership Summit was organized in Warsaw during the Polish EU Presidency. Polish and German ministers of foreign affairs Radoslaw Sikorski and Frank-Walter Steinmeier were negotiating compromise between president Victor Yanukovych and the Ukrainian opposition during the Euromaidan protest in 2014. Chancellor Angela Merkel is still playing a key role in maintaining contact with President Vladimir Putin and attempting to maintain a cease-fire between pro-Russian separatists, supported directly by the Russian army, and the Ukrainian side.

The advantage of a Polish-German tandem is that the policies of Warsaw and Berlin complement each other despite the apparent divergence of their political interests. Prior to the Russian annexation of Crimea, there was a serious difference between Poland and Germany over policy toward Russia. Germany's *Ostpolitik* conviction was based on a "Russia first" attitude. Analogously, Poland conducted a "Russia last" policy based on a completely different historical experience with this country. There are unresolved issues in Polish-Russian relations, including Russian recognition that the massacres of Polish officers in Katyn, Kharkov, and Miednoye were war crimes; and Russian unhelpfulness in the investigation of the crash of the Polish presidential plane near Smolensk in 2010 (Russia refused to turn over the plane's black boxes). If Polish and German counterparts come together to address Russia, the synthesis of their differences of opinion can produce moderate compromise policies that balance strategic partnership and rivalry with Russia.

In the near future Poland and Germany may be the main advocates for establishing a common Eastern Policy on the part of the West, one based on solidarity between the United States and the EU. Especially in the context of events in Ukraine, the importance of such a project needs to gain momentum. History shows that a common voice from Washington and Brussels not only holds an important meaning, but also plays a crucial role in making effective foreign policy. Such a policy

should also be created with an eye toward the long term, where an ad-hoc perspective will not be a main determinant.

Lately the policy of the West toward Russia has been threatened by self-serving attempts to secure cheap oil and gas and to find market outlets for Western products in Russia. In addition, there has been a serious rift between the policies of the United States and those of the European Union. European politicians could not count on the support of their American colleagues during their difficult talks with President Viktor Yanukovich on an association agreement prior to the Euromaidan events. The importance of this rift went far beyond the relations between Ukraine and the EU. Nor does the EU speak with one voice. Even today, individual European Union countries cast doubt on the legitimacy of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia. European governments explain this as a desire to rebuild their economic relations with the country.

The common policy we are referring to will not be possible without a strong commitment by both the United States and Europe. Poland and Germany can play a constructive and complementary role in this respect. As a strategic ally of the United States, Poland is for many reasons regarded in Europe as a promoter of maintaining the presence of American troops on European soil. Germany, especially after the NSA scandal and revelations about US wiretapping of Chancellor Merkel's phone, maintains its aloofness to the idea of a stronger American presence in Europe. On the other hand, Germany has very often showed European and Western public opinion that it does not want to be the individual leader of the European Union. Poland can therefore act as a co-leader in Europe's Eastern policy, which, should it happen, would be a symbolic moment as a new European Union member state, with the experience of communism, would be the political precursor of the Western world common foreign policy.

Poland, as an exceptional NATO member, has met the criteria of 2% of GDP spending on defense. For this reason, this country is fully aware of the need to strengthen the European component of the alliance. Germans also are aware that possible future presence of American troops must involve financial participation from European countries.

Defense policy presents us with one of the most important questions regarding Russia. Do we build a Western system of security *with* Russia or *against* Russia? On this particular point Poland and Berlin hold different approaches. Berlin has been trying since the collapse of the Soviet Union to bring Russia into a Western security architecture. The current German minister of foreign affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, was a key promoter of the Partnership for Modernization, which assumed that a modern and rich Russia would be a serious component of a wider Euro-Atlantic political and security system.

Since 1989 Poland has faced a number of economic and political threats from Russia such as threats to stop gas supplies, locating tactical missiles in the Kaliningrad region, repeated embargos and military exercises close to Polish-Russian and Polish-Belarusian borders, etc. Those threats clearly shaped Warsaw's views of Russian policy. Since the days of the Orange Revolution in 2004/2005, when the Polish political elite supported the Ukrainian opposition, contact between Warsaw and Moscow has been nearly non-existent. Polish support for the installation of US missile-defense facilities in Poland and the aftermath of the Polish presidential plane crash in Smolensk cooled political relations between Russia and Poland.

The Russian annexation of the Crimea has led to a convergence in the way the Polish and German governments approach relations with the Kremlin. Polish-German joint actions include the imposition of economic and political sanctions on Russia. The Polish and German governments very often highlight evidence of direct Russian intervention in Eastern Ukraine, showing other EU countries that Europe should stay united. The president of the European Council, former Polish prime minister Donald Tusk, insists on the position that a return to “business as usual” after the annexation of Crimea will not be possible. Russia’s actions in the South and East of Ukraine have also led to a convergence of views between Berlin and Washington. Angela Merkel and Barack Obama are in constant contact over a common policy towards Vladimir Putin.

The changes in Western countries’ policies towards Russia should lead us in the future to the establishment of a unified Western long-term policy towards the East. In a way, this large geopolitical project can be called *Ostpolitik 2.0* or *Die neue Ostpolitik*. The reference to Willy Brandt’s policy is not coincidental. The Brandt Government’s rationale in changing German policy toward the USSR and the Polish People’s Republic, and recognizing Germany’s reduced borders, was based on the assumption that the new level of relations would greatly increase contacts, and that those contacts could lead to real change in the socialist countries. The policy of „change through rapprochement” is still valid. However, we have to answer the question whom in Russia we want to approach.

Similarly, today one must accept the fact that Putin's Russia is not credible to the Western world as a liberal democracy. Therefore, just as in the days of the Soviet Union, we should look to make contact with representatives of a civic, open, and democratic Russia, who, like Americans or Europeans, see the opportunity to put Western-Russian relations on a more positive track in order to secure world order. Youth exchanges, scientific cooperation, joint cultural projects, the construction of a Western-Russia network of non-governmental organizations, etc. are an absolute necessity in maintaining invaluable contacts between Washington-Brussels-Moscow. This should not be regarded as a substitute for, but rather should complement relations at the highest political level. The dialogue, though difficult and often fruitless, must be maintained. No contact is worse than mutual incomprehension.

For obvious reasons the current Russia-Western conflict provides a challenge for the Western world and with it a major geopolitical problem. The post-Cold War world order rebalanced the vast majority of European countries with peace, but after the annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the beginning of the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine, war fears have returned. Regrettably, the West must accept the fact that the future will be less stable and less secure than it has been for the last quarter century. The increase in the terrorist threat in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, the growing importance of regional powers, the prolonged global economic crisis, the current refugee crisis and climate change will only complicate the world we live in. The United States, the European Union, and NATO must prepare to meet future threats in these volatile times, and in this regard we can draw on past lessons on how to promote reconciliation as a mutual project.

It should also be noted that the lesson of Polish-German reconciliation and cooperation can take on new meaning today, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. Many experts say that the process of reconciliation between the West and Russia will not proceed along the lines of Polish and German reconciliation, because of the absence of immediate military confrontation. Such

opinion is only partially true. In fact, the U.S. Army never fought directly against the Red Army or the Army of the Russian Federation. However Cold War conflicts in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan have been the scene of military struggle between the Western world and the Soviet Union. Many families in the United States and Russia lost their loved ones in these conflicts. Also, the contemporary conflict in Eastern Ukraine is perceived in a similar category. The Ukrainian Army is defending not only the integrity and independence of its country but also testifies to Ukraine's political will in asserting its belonging to the West.

In this context, calls for reconciliation between the West and Russia may seem premature or even naive. We cannot build reconciliation during the conflict, but after it. However, at this point we have to remember that after today comes tomorrow, after war comes peace and that today's decisions of politicians and military commanders will have an impact for decades on future generations.

The current Kremlin elite should remember that they will not continue to rule indefinitely, and the growing hatred between Russians and Ukrainians or between the Russians and both Europeans and Americans will be the source of many problems for tomorrow's generations. Staying in the den of their own perceptions, prejudices and stereotypes don't help reconciliation. The success of such a process is impossible without forgiveness, and this is not possible without serious reflection, the realization of guilt, and an act of repentance.

Also, the elite of the West should not wait passively for a gesture from Russia. Many Russians are unwilling to talk about their own difficult and complicated history. They believe that an open discussion about the crimes of Stalinism, the huge losses caused by erroneous decisions of military commanders often blinded by Soviet ideology will somehow diminish the pride they take in victory over German Nazism. The West as the stronger party should show empathy to Russians and should take the initiative in a conciliatory process. In this way, Western leaders can help the process of Russian-Russian reconciliation, which is a key for sincere and honest restoration of the relations between the West and Russia.

Individuals listed below have been interviewed by the author of the following policy paper. They are not responsible for the contents of this paper. Recommendations reflect the views of the author. Affiliations are provided for identification purposes only.

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For research purposes a Polish-German roundtable discussion took place in Berlin on March 30th 2015 with the active participation of the following experts:

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