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# ESTABLISHMENT OF PEOPLE’S ROOMS DURING THE PERIOD OF THE REPUBLICAN PEOPLE’S PARTY IN TURKEY AND WORKING PRINCIPLES OF TURKISH LITERACY COURSES

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## Introduction

After the National War of Independence successfully ended, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk thought the actual battle should be against ignorance. At that time, the Turkish nation fell behind for years in science, culture, art, and other fields. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk observed that after the War of Independence was won, the first thing that should be done was to improve Turkish people and raise their awareness in every way. There was a need for an organization that would serve Turkish people in this respect. To meet this need, it was decided to establish People’s Houses. The purpose of the establishment of the People’s Houses is explained in the By-Law of People’s Houses issued by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) in 1932 as follows: *“Although we must work in the field of education more than any nation, the formal and informal forces concentrating on the same objective in our country, whose material and spiritual means are unfortunately very inadequate, may reveal the value of the necessity of this situation. Now, it is our duty, more than any other nation, to dismantle the roots of the institutions that have gone down in history and penetrated the deepest layers of society, and to root the principles of the republic and revolution as sacred pillars of faith that dominate all souls and ideas. The principles of our party are Republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolutionism. For these basic and main principles to gain dominance and become eternal, educating citizens who embrace these principles, raising our national character to the level Turkish history inspired, promoting fine arts, and strengthening our national culture, and scientific movements and activities are designated and indicated as important means in our program. All these indications and means aim to train generations to take back the long years lost by the Turkish nation on the way to civilization through brave, venturesome and tireless moves, and to re-establish the Turkish nation’s honor in the field of civilization with its natural virtues and abilities. People’s Houses aim to become gathering and unifying places for idealistic citizens who will work for this cause”* (CHP Halkevleri Talimatnamesi, 1932:3).

After the preparations were completed, on February 19, 1932, People’s Houses were officially established. The branches of People’s Houses were opened in 14 cities at the

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same time with a ceremony held in Ankara on that date. The branches: The branches of People's Houses in Ankara, Afyon, Samsun, Eskişehir, Diyarbakır, İzmir, Konya, Denizli, Van, Aydın, Çanakkale, Bursa, İstanbul, and Adana started working right away (Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, 1932:1). When the CHP saw that they could not achieve the desired efficiency in the People's Houses until 1939, they started to search for reasons. After determining that most of the people lived in the villages in that period, institutions that worked as subbranches rather than People's Houses were needed. The mission of People's Rooms was to perform the duties, that People's Houses took on in the cities, in the villages. To open a People's House, at least three branches had to be established. But it was difficult to meet this requirement in small and rural areas because the number of members was inadequate, and the situation of structure did not allow the opening of a People's House. Then, taking into consideration the requests from rural areas, the CHP decided to open the People's Rooms, which operate with the same purpose as the People's Houses, at the Fifth Grand Assembly of the CHP (CHP Beşinci Büyük Kurultayı Zabıtları, 1939:100).

When the CHP established the People's Houses in 1932, they aimed to bring the values of the Republic and the revolutions to the people. However, by the 1940s, the CHP understood that it could not find enough support in the villages and that it could not provide the influence of the government sufficiently. It tried these activities with village instructors and the branches of people's houses such as public classrooms and village movements, even if it succeeded to a certain extent, it could not change the villages enough culturally. At that time, the CHP examined this issue and decided to open the people's rooms to increase the number of educated people in the villages and to earn people's trust in the state authority and the new regime. For this purpose, in 1939, the "By-Law of People's Rooms" consisting of 20 articles was created. Finally, on February 19, 1940, 141 People's Rooms were opened (Zeyrek, 2006:33). According to the third article of the regulation of People's Rooms, it was decided that in order to open a People's Room, at least 50 members should be registered, there should be a meeting room and a reading room, and an annual budget sufficient to cover the expenses (CHP Halkevleri Talimatnamesi, 1932:1). In line with this decision, to help every part of the country to feel the influence of the government, the regions with low education levels were targeted. Accordingly, more intensive efforts were carried out in the Eastern Anatolia, Southeastern Anatolia, Mediterranean Region, and the east of the Black Sea Region.

### **Establishment of People's Rooms and Turkish Reading-Writing Activities**

The writers of the history of the Republic have done a lot of work on the People's Houses, which are the cultural institutions of the Republic. In the literature, People's Houses are generally focused on, but there is not much research on People's Rooms. Just like the People's Houses, the People's Rooms were also established as cultural institutions

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serving the principles of the Republican People's Party, which are Republicanism, Nationalism, Populism, Secularism, Statism, and Revolutionism. Like the People's Houses, People's Rooms opened their doors to everyone, whether they were registered to the party or not. However, to become the leader or a board member of the People's Room, it was necessary to be a government official or to be registered to the party in written form (CHP Halkevleri Talimatnamesi, 1932:1). People's Rooms have done an important job in terms of public education and bringing people to a contemporary level. When the literacy rate in Turkey is examined, in 1927, the literacy rate was 4% for women, 13% for men, and 8.16% for the general population. 5-6% of this rate was the Turks who knew the old script (Ottoman script), and the rest was non-Muslims and people who spoke other languages. The literacy rate in cities was around 30%, and in villages, it was around 6% (Tongul, 2004:53-54). After the alphabet reform, a major education mobilization was started to teach and spread Latin letters. It was thought that this problem would disappear as the new alphabet was easy to learn even if the literacy rate was low with respect to old alphabet. It was not difficult for people living in the cities to learn the new alphabet as educational institutions were easily accessible for them. But the people living in rural areas had to learn to read and write in the new alphabet as soon as possible. In other words, people had to be educated. However, both the educational staff and the technical situation were not adequate for the solution to this problem (Şimşek, 1986:34-108)

Like People's Houses, People's Rooms have made important efforts to spread the new alphabet, to root the reforms and to carry out literacy activities. When People's Rooms were opened in the 1940s, nearly 4/3 of Turkey's population were living in villages. The mission of People's Rooms was to perform the duties, that People's Houses took on in the cities, in the villages. To open a People's House, at least three branches had to be established. But it was difficult to meet this requirement in small and rural areas because the number of members was inadequate, and the situation of structure did not allow the opening of a People's House. Then, taking into consideration the requests from rural areas, the CHP decided to open the People's Rooms, which operate with the same purpose as the People's Houses, at the Fifth Grand Assembly of the CHP (CHP Beşinci Büyük Kurultayı Zabıtları, 1939:100).

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### **Opening and Implementation Principles of Literary Courses within People's Houses and People's Rooms and Turkish Literacy Courses**

According to the CHP By-Law of People's Houses, there were certain conditions for opening a People's House. People's Houses were usually opened in city centers and central towns. But some rural areas lacked these conditions. Rural areas could not meet the requirement to open three branches, and they did not have the sufficient number of members and enough budget to maintain their buildings and activities. In the 1940s, the CHP decided to make some changes related to the villages in order to make people living in the villages fully comprehend the Republic. For these reasons, it was thought that there was a need for certain institutions to act as People's Houses. The name of this new institution was determined as People's Rooms. In 1939, the by-law of People's Rooms, which consisted of 20 articles, was prepared, and firstly, 141 People's Rooms were opened on February 19, 1940 (Zeyrek, 2006:183). Another reason for the opening of the People's Rooms was that the majority of people were living in the villages as industrialization did not reach a sufficient level in that period. The CHP has opened the People's Rooms due to their idea of spreading their ideology and the reforms to a wider area. People's Rooms were established in 1940 and started its activities. In 1939, General Secretariat sent a letter to all the directorates of the People's Houses for Turkish literacy courses. The letter sent by General Secretariat of the Republican People's Party to the directorates of People's Houses on November 4, 1939, stated the following: *"In the minimum work plan we sent to all People's Houses at the beginning of the year, we asked each People's House to open a course to teach illiterate citizens to read and write in Turkish. I'm sending the instructions regarding these courses. According to the statistics of 1935, only 2,517,878 out of 16,157,450 citizens know how to read and write. The percentage of illiterate citizens is 84.4%. Accordingly, there is no doubt that it is the first duty of every enlightened citizen to make all the sacrifices to reduce this percentage to zero. Our People's Houses and People's Rooms, which will increase in number each*

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*year, may gladly take on this task. They can help to reduce the number of illiterate people with a minimum of one course in each house. I said a minimum of one course, but if there are some opportunities and more than one course is opened, of course, the service area would be expanded. I am confident that People's Houses will fully accomplish this task, like many other tasks they accomplished before. I look forward to your success, and I pay my respects. Secretary-General of the CHP, Deputy of Erzurum, Dr. A. F. Tuzer.”* (BCA, Nr: 490-01-4-21-30-1).

There was no need for 9 boards to manage 9 branches in People's Rooms, unlike People's Houses because a team of 5 people undertakes all the work of the center. To open a People's Room, at least 50 members should be registered, there should be a meeting room and a reading room, and an annual budget sufficient to cover the expenses of the People's Room. While the number of People's Rooms was 141 in 1940, it reached 4322 in 1950 (Kunter, 1964:36).

By the year 1944, 204 public classroom and course branches were opened in 405 People's Houses. However, in the newly established People's Houses, language and literature, or library branches dealt with this matter and took on this task. At that time, Turkish literacy courses were the most emphasized subject, in order to eliminate the ignorance of the public. The General Secretariat requested that Turkish literacy courses be opened in all the People's Houses and People's Rooms by issuing a circular numbered 5/5668 on October 23, 1944. Until the issuance of the circular in 1944, 103 People's Houses and 233 Turkish literacy courses were opened (C.H.P. Halkevleri ve Halk Odaları 1944, 1945:15- 16).

In the 6th chapter of the working instructions of the People's Houses, which cover the missions and types of the courses, Turkish literacy courses are the main part. Turkish literacy courses aimed to teach reading and writing in Turkish to citizens who are over the primary school age, to strengthen their love of country and to make them more productive in their work and various matters of life (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:5). From this point of view, the main goal was set as teaching people, who were 16 or above, to read and write in Turkish. Public classrooms carried out efforts regarding this matter.

The branch of public classrooms classified Turkish literacy courses into two groups. According to this classification, the A course involves people who do not know how to read and write at all; the B course involves people who want to improve their knowledge or to revise what they have forgotten. It has also made it possible for groups A and B to be opened in the same classroom with different approaches in places where the number of students in both groups is sufficient for one classroom (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946, 1946:6).

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## **Locations and Opening of the Courses and Conditions for Opening**

The courses were opened in the cities, towns, and villages by the People's Houses and People's Rooms. Where a People's House or a People's Room is available, a suitable place for the course will be allocated to this cause during working hours. If the People's House did not have a place suitable for this, other buildings were used. During the summer months, activities such as outdoor class houses can be arranged. Normally, the number of students in the classroom should not exceed 30. The citizens who are over the age of compulsory education and do not know how to read and write may continue these courses. If the number of students exceeds the limit, the courses are divided into groups such as women-men coed, or according to their ages. The level of the attenders and the groups they should be placed are determined by the course teachers. After the preparations regarding the opening of the literacy courses are completed, the opening day is announced a week before with the existing means of communication. In addition, the administrators and the boards of aldermen are going to remind the people, who do not know how to read and write, that the course will be opened to ensure attendance to the course. Joint courses may be opened between the villages which are in the form of neighborhoods, or where the distance between the villages is up to 5 kilometers, so it is convenient to go on foot. In small places where the number of illiterate people is only enough to complete the quota of one course, mobile courses may be established once. The mobile parts of the mediums of education in these courses are carried to the places where the future courses will be opened and they are used continuously. If the teacher of such courses is a primary school teacher elsewhere and his/her actual job is far away, the courses here will be opened during the holiday months (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:7).

People's Houses will also open courses for citizens, who do not know how to read and write but are not enough in number to fill up the quota of a course, in business communities, factories, government enterprises, and prisons after meeting the relevant managers at those places. In this way, these institutions will provide help for the costs of the courses to be opened.

## **Duration and Working Hours of the Courses**

Literacy courses last at least four months. It is also possible to extend this period for one month according to the feature of the teaching situation, accessibility to the location, and the ability of the students to progress. The starting and ending times and course hours are determined according to the seasons, climatic conditions at the location, attendance of the students, and job requirements. The course teacher decides, with the branch of public classrooms, the chairperson of the People's House, and the headmen of the villages, whether the classes will be held in the daytime or nighttime, and whether they will

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be held on the certain days of the week. Lessons last one and a half hours and a short break of 5-10 minutes can be taken. Regular attendance is a must for those who attend A courses. Those who fail to attend the courses enough to catch up with the general level of the course shall be disenrolled. There is a more convenient program for those who want to improve their knowledge in the B courses according to different levels and needs (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:8).

### **Prosecution of Studies and Obtaining Results**

A book that includes the name, surname, age, place of birth, occupation, and monthly success rates of the students who are registered in the courses and attend the classes is kept. The course teacher keeps this book with her/him at the teaching institution. He/she gives it to the class houses branch at the end of the course. The chairpersons of the People's House or People's Room shall inform the general secretariat with a short letter describing the duration of the course, the number of students and the results of the study upon the report they will receive from the chairpersons of the class houses. Party inspectors, administrators, and authorized cultural staff prosecute and examine the work and needs of the courses. Course teachers also announce the help they expect from them. In addition, the course studies and results may occasionally be shown in a program to those who are curious (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:9).

### **The Opening and Closing Ceremony**

On the opening and closing days of the courses, a ceremony is held in the People's House or the People's Room, with the participation of the local administrative staff and the boards of aldermen. These ceremonies should be conducted with a concise program according to the purpose. Attention should be paid to recreating local characteristics and giving students a role (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:9). The chairperson of the People's House or the public classroom branch, course teacher, village headman, or one of them briefly describes to the ceremony participants the studies carried out in this course and the benefits achieved. He/she wishes success to the students who finished the course and tries to increase enthusiasm for future courses in the area. At the end of the ceremony, the students who completed the course are given achievement certificates (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:10).

### **Procedures and Teaching Tools of the Program**

The course teaches the main methods of reading and writing in Turkish properly. In the first lessons, reading and writing are taught together, but as the course progresses, it

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focuses on one of them more according to needs (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:10).

The following principles are taken into consideration in reading: In the first classes, alphabets, reading books and tables at the People's Room or People's House, that are published by the Ministry of National Education are used according to the age and maturity level of the students. Reading and writing starts with easy, interesting, and meaningful words, short proverbs, and taking into consideration that students are adults, an analytical approach is taken. In other words, the course quickly proceeds to the stage of reading and writing letters separately. For slow learners, capital letters written on thick paper, embossed letters, moving letterboxes, and various supplementary materials are used (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:10). In the first lessons, the teacher should read an example and occasionally, they should try to read together under the teacher's supervision. Reading properly, clearly, and easily should be the main objective starting from the first lessons, and the course should progress according to this purpose (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:11).

While writing, it is necessary to pay attention to the following points: the writing will be legible, smooth and useful, and the handwriting and adjacent writing will be introduced according to the developments in the following lessons. Keeping copybooks clean, correcting mistakes by revising on the board or notebooks, paying attention to the examples, making students correct the mistakes by themselves, and supervision of the students should not be neglected. As the letter reading and writing lessons progress, the sentences and passages that the teacher or student will think of and say should be written, instead of using only books. The writing of relevant and appropriate parts from newspapers should be handled gradually in terms of the richness of the forms of writing, and the breadth of movement. The focus should be on introducing the necessary books to the students and attracting their interest in reading (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:11). The students should read their own writings and those on the board loudly or sometimes silently, and they should find the mistakes together. For the long passages, the students should read them silently, and they should be asked to talk about the passage in order to evaluate their reading comprehension. Common mistakes and new words to be taught will be written on the board, and the students will read them in front of the class. In the second half of the course, the main methods of calligraphy, the simplest examples of composition and the harmony of writing will be emphasized within the bounds of possibility. Teachers should be patient with those who have difficulty in writing properly at first, and they should keep progressing slowly by tolerating some mistakes, and also show the students how to hold the pen correctly (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:12).

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## Writing the Numbers

Reading and writing basic numbers other than letters will also be taught. Those who come to the course will be helped to improve this skill as well within the bounds of possibility, and if it attracts continuous attention, only calculations will be taught during the additional lessons on certain days of the week (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:12).

## Reading Passages and Library

Alphabets and primary reading books will be used for those who do not know how to read at all. After the present book is finished, short reading passages will be used, and also the course will provide short stories of nature and folk poetry for enthusiastic and outstanding students. Depending on whether the course is in the village or city, some features of the reading passages should be searched for, and the appropriate pages should be collected together. If there are books and newspapers in the library of the People's House or People's Room, it should be accessible for the course students, and a small reading cabinet should be kept in the classroom. For those who reached an advanced level and who earned to attend the complementary courses, it is a great benefit to try and manage such a library and to give students books to read in the evenings for one week by signature. In the last month of the course, short letters, telegraphs, bills, receipts, and petition samples will be read and written by the students who learned how to read and write, and the students will also do some exercises. More diverse examples will be shown to those who have already learned to read and write. Difficulties encountered in both these efforts and others will be reported to the center through People's Houses and the party. The center will also work on providing necessary tools, preparing comprehensive manuals and useful books (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:13).

## Public Speeches

Apart from the ceremonies to be held at the beginning and end of the course, public speeches to refresh and keep alive the memories of the national days will be made at least once a month in order to strengthen the literacy skills of the students. Moreover, at these meetings, students will be given the opportunity to speak freely and explain their problems. If these speeches occur at the same time as national and local holidays and ceremonies, and conditions are suitable, selected folk songs, folk dances, parts of the joyful and exciting performances of sports, film, acting, and music of People's Houses are also added to the program. In these kinds of speeches, strengthening national feelings and patriotism of the course students is important to spread the excitement of great works that have been achieved in history and the years of the Republic. If there are cultured and knowledgeable people around, they are also given the opportunity to talk about the

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main health procedures and the work done by those attending the course. When bringing these all together, we should stick to being good and sincere, not exhibiting deceitful behaviors, and avoiding long speeches. Speeches will be given importance as the most natural requirement of the first reading. In the first days, everyone will meet each other and talk about the places they are from, or they have been to, and their jobs. After this, the lessons will start (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:13-14).

### **Certificate of Completion**

Those who successfully complete the People's Houses' Turkish literacy courses will be given a certificate of completion, and those who achieve great success will be presented with useful books from the publications of the People's House. Those who complete A courses can enroll in the next-level course to improve what they have learned. Here, people whose ages are suitable, find the opportunity to try to make up their knowledge deficiencies in order to prepare for primary school examinations. Those who are transferred to another place due to their work and family while attending this course, finish the remaining classes in the courses held in their newly transferred area through this certificate (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:14-15).

### **Course Teachers**

Enthusiastic instructors who show success in teaching how to read and write at the studies of People's House or People's Room of that place are employed as teachers. The chairpersons of the People's Houses or the classroom branch will find these teachers by agreeing with the authorized cultural staff, if necessary. In places where there are no teachers, teachers will be selected from civil servants and intellectuals or from those with secondary education graduation who are willing to teach how to read and write in Turkish in People's House or People's Room or various cultural institutions of that area. Course teachers will work until the end of the course unless they are transferred to somewhere else for their original task, and at the end of the course, they will report to the administration of People's House or People's Room about the results of the course studies, and their wishes and recommendations for the future. The summary of these reports shall be communicated in the study reports together with the opinions of the relevant branch of the People's House or the People's Room (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:15-16).

### **Needs and Expenses of the Course**

In the literacy course, pictures of eternal (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) and national chiefs (İsmet İnönü), reading plates, a small and useful book corner, mobile wallboard and

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supplies, tables and chairs from the People's House are kept at hand within the bounds of possibility. Personal learning materials such as books, notebooks, and pens will be brought by the participants. In places where it is difficult to obtain these materials, they may be brought and distributed by the People's House, and help will be given to those in need. Lighting and heating expenses will be covered by the budget of the People's Houses (CHP Halkevleri ve Halkodaları Türkçe Okuma ve Yazma Kursları İçin Kılavuz, 1946:16).

The CHP took a meticulous approach to the needs of People's Houses and People's Rooms. Those who wanted to open courses submitted their petitions to the Secretary-General of the CHP. These requests were evaluated according to the number of course attendees reported to open a course and were answered quickly.

### **Conclusion**

After the proclamation of the Republic, many reforms were made to raise people to the level of contemporary civilization. Many changes were attempted during the Ottoman period, but it was either unsuccessful or inadequate for several reasons. One of the most important reforms made during the Republican period was the alphabet reform. Nation's Schools were opened when the alphabet reform was made. Nation's Schools undertook the task of spreading the new alphabet. The Republican People's Party (CHP), which was the ruling party of the period, established People's Houses on February 19, 1932, to fully introduce the reforms to the public. People's Houses also took on important tasks in the teaching of letters through the branches of the Public Classrooms and courses. But at that time, most of the people lived in rural areas. People's Rooms were established in 1940 in rural areas where People's Houses could not be opened.

In the Republican period, new educational institutions were opened and regulations were made in order to improve education in our country. Executive management attached great importance to formal education, and at the same time, the needs of the citizens were met by establishing the Nation's Schools, People's Houses, and People's Rooms for the citizens who are not within the scope of formal education to become literate. The efforts on teaching the new letters and making the Turkish nation literate through Turkish reading and writing activities, which were carried out by People's Rooms, who took on major tasks in public education, especially in rural areas in Turkey between the years of 1940-1950, are of great importance. As part of these activities, Turkish literacy courses were opened in all regions of Turkey by People's Rooms. Through these courses, it was aimed to make the people who live in the village literate and to provide better insight into Republican values.

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