

**The Situation of At-risk and Displaced  
Artists and Culture Professionals**

**ON  
THE  
MOVE**

**Volume 3  
Case Studies**

**CHAPTER 5**

**Case Study:  
The Martin Roth-  
Initiative's Funding  
in Germany  
Programme  
(Germany)**



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# CHAPTER 5

## Case Study: The Martin Roth- Initiative's Funding in Germany Programme (Germany)

by Franziska Stambke

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This case study closely examines the [Martin Roth-Initiative \(MRI\)](#), a German fellowship programme that supports artists and cultural actors at risk. The aim is to offer deeper insights into the initiative's operational framework, identify key challenges and opportunities as well as the potential for transferability and further expansion of the programme's model. The analysis draws on programme documents, interviews with the Head of MRI, Maik Müller, as well as reports on the initiative published by [Institut für Außenbeziehungen](#) (ifa) and the [Goethe-Institut](#). It also incorporates findings from the UNESCO 2005 Convention's policy monitoring platform, including the Quadrennial Reports on the Convention's implementation by EU Member States.

The joint initiative by ifa and the Goethe-Institute emerged in response to growing global concerns for artistic freedom of artists and cultural actors. Named after renowned museum director and cultural scientist Martin Roth, MRI came to life in 2017 following a collective public appeal by directors of German renowned theatres, museums and film institutions, calling on the Federal Government to set up a programme for displaced, persecuted and exiled artists<sup>1</sup>. The programme offers temporary relocation for artists at risk—either within the artist's region or in Germany—allowing recipients to continue their work and pursue professional development. This case study focuses only on the 'Temporary Relocation to Germany' programme, examining MRI's support for displaced artists who relocate there.

## Objective and goals

The objectives of MRI are rooted in its core vision for 'an open society in a peaceful world, where artists and cultural actors can act freely, and civil society actors can engage for democracy and freedom of speech'<sup>2</sup>. Within a global context where free and open spaces for artists and cultural actors to practice their work are shrinking, MRI has set itself the goal to not only help artists who live under oppressive regimes, to temporarily get out of their fragile contexts, but also provide a space where these artists can continue their artistic work and further their professional development<sup>3</sup>. A key

objective of the initiative is to provide financial and professional support to the artists in such a way that they can continue their artistic work, expand their professional artistic network and feel strengthened to return to their country of origin, if possible, or that the foundation for the next steps into the society of the host country have been laid.

The MRI programme in Germany operates through a decentralised model, awarding fellowships via hosting organisations, which are either cultural institutions or civil society organisations.

1 Federal Foreign Office, Press release '[Foreign Minister Gabriel expresses support for an initiative for persecuted artists](#)', 18 September 2017.

2 Martin Roth-Initiative, [Press kit in English](#), 2024.

3 Ibid.

The programme aims to strengthen these organisations so they can temporarily host at-risk artists and cultural actors, who are then able to continue their artistic work safely. Beyond temporary protection in Germany, the programme

also supports ongoing exchange between the artists and their communities and fosters cultural dialogue in Germany and internationally, which is particularly relevant in an increasingly polarised political climate.

## Funding and resources

MRI is a joint project of ifa and the Goethe-Institut, funded exclusively by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany. In 2023, MRI received a total budget of 2.4 million EUR, which supported 330 fellowship holders both in Germany and abroad<sup>4</sup>.

Public funds are allocated to host organisations who manage the stipends, assist with accommodation and offer support for bureaucratic and everyday matters. MRI collaborates with over 100 cultural institutions or civil society organisations, ranging from theatres to museums, festivals, cultural centres and more<sup>5</sup>. With the flexible and needs-based funding mode, MRI is able to offer tailored support to each individual artist. The use of public funds not only ensures sustainability but also lends credibility to the initiative as a tool of Germany's cultural relations and human rights protection<sup>6</sup>. Between 2017 and 2024, MRI recorded a total of 620 supported artists, from

41 countries and from 119 host organisations<sup>7</sup>. While the total number of applications is not disclosed, it can be estimated that it is a highly selective process. For example, in a 2022 call for applications, as shared by [ARS Baltica](#), it was estimated that only around 10-15 protective stays would get funded in Germany.

Compared to the MRI funding for artists in the regions of origin, support in Germany is the most cost-intensive programme, due to higher living costs and the need for longer fellowships, which can last up to 15 months. Maik Müller explained that the longer stay in Germany—compared to 3-6 months for the funding in the regions of origin—is linked to a longer arrival period of artists, which depends on the cultural background and needs of the artist. Unlike those in other countries, German hosts usually support only one artist at a time.

4 Deutscher Bundestag, Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung, [27. Bericht der Bundesregierung über die Auswärtige Kultur- und Gesellschaftspolitik für das Jahr 2023](#) [German Bundestag, Information by the Federal Government, 27<sup>th</sup> Report of the Federal Government on Foreign Cultural and Social Policy for 2023], 20/14599, 11 December 2024, page 20.

5 Martin Roth-Initiative, [Press kit in English](#), 2024.

6 Federal Foreign Office, [Third Quadrennial Periodic Report on the Implementation of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in and by Germany in the 2016-2019 Reporting Period](#), 2020, page 6.

7 Martin Roth-Initiative, [Press kit in English](#), 2024.

# Target groups and conditions

## Artists

Funding through MRI is open to any artist or cultural practitioner worldwide, who experiences restrictions on their freedom, including discrimination, or threats—from state actors or non-state actors—due to their political activism, or their artistic and cultural work.

Artists must demonstrate their cultural or artistic activities in their country of origin and show the social relevance of their work, demonstrating a commitment to ‘an open society, freedom, peace and democracy through their artistic and cultural work’<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, artists must still be active in their region of origin or have only moved out recently—after the deadline of the previous MRI call for applications—or are not safe in their current country of residence. Artists also need to prove that they do not have access to a different safe country of residence (such as through dual citizenship or other residence permits). Another requirement is that the artist needs to be able to communicate in a language that enables the collaboration with the host organisation. Finally, any EU citizens or artists that have previously been funded by MRI are not eligible for funding.

In the period of 2017 to 2024, MRI artists mostly originated from Sudan, Belarus and Afghanistan (more than 50 artists per country of origin), followed by Turkey, Syria, Russia, Myanmar and Iran. Other artists who were accepted for funding came from Brazil, Egypt, Colombia, Libya, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Uruguay, Morocco, Algeria, Chad, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda, Yemen, Palestine, Lebanon, Montenegro, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, China,

Thailand, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The disciplines of supported artists and cultural actors were equally diverse; while artists of all artistic disciplines are welcome to apply, there was a notable dominance of visual arts (37%) among the accepted scholarship placements, followed by music and film (14% each), theatre (13%), interdisciplinary arts (11%), and literature (10%). Next to artists, cultural practitioners were also accepted into the programme for funding in Germany, including curators or cultural managers<sup>9</sup>.

## Host organisations

Eligible host organisations can be any non-profit cultural institution, artist collective or civil society organisation, including but not limited to museums, theatres, festivals or other relevant organisations in Germany with experience in public funding. The host organisation is the first point of contact during the application phase and throughout the entire duration of the project, as they are the primary link between MRI and the artist. While there is no full list of all past and current host organisations publicly available, some are featured in artist testimonies published on the MRI website, the majority of which are located in big cities, including Hamburg and Berlin<sup>10</sup>. In other cases, host organisations have publicly shared the call for applications, such as when the [Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik \(Z/KU\)](#) in Berlin shared the [2023 MRI call for applications](#) for funding in Germany and invited artists and cultural actors at risk to apply in a tandem.

Host organisations must be capable of integrating an artist at risk into their institutional structures and enabling them to continue

<sup>8</sup> See the general information on the application process [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Roth-Initiative, [‘Portraits of current and former MRI scholarship holders and their artistic work’](#).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

their artistic practice by providing access to relevant resources, expertise, and networks. This includes managing the payment of monthly stipends, supporting the search for accommodation, and offering practical support with bureaucratic and everyday matters, such as registering with local authorities or accessing

wellbeing and healthcare resources. Finally, because of the precarious situation of artists at risk coming to Germany and the fact that artists may experience severe censorship from the government in their countries of origin, the host organisation must uphold digital security in sensitive communications.

## Application and selection process

### Distribution of the call for applications

The open call for applications is managed primarily by MRI, as well as by ifa and the Goethe-Institut, and is distributed via their respective websites and social media channels. The dissemination of the call is supported through existing MRI networks, alumni, and human rights organisations. Müller explained that this decentralised approach helps reach applicants in local languages through trusted intermediaries and a network of MRI alumni, thereby enhancing awareness of MRI opportunities.

### Application procedure

For security reasons applicants are encouraged to use encrypted communication services for all email contact with MRI, such as Protonmail (a free encrypted email service). Additionally, MRI advises applicants to ensure that the use of such a communication service won't lead to issues (such as suspicion or legal action) in their countries of origin. If necessary, applicants are advised to seek local advice or research online, referring to resources such as [Privacy International](#).

Applications can be submitted through the open call for applications. The application process is digital and access to the application platform is granted by MRI upon email request. When first contacting MRI, applicants should indicate

whether they are a representative of a host organisation or an artist or cultural actor, and also indicate the name of their co-applicant. After this initial request, applicants will receive the login data for their personal account on the application platform. MRI also offers free online info sessions for artists (in English) and for hosts (in English and German). From the call for applications it is not clear in which language the application should be submitted, but given that one of the requirements for the tandem application is that the artist and host can communicate in a language they both understand, it is likely that applications can be submitted in at least German and English. While there is no information available about other methods to apply, for example in the case of those with a disability, MRI encourages applicants to contact them with any additional questions about the application platform.

Host organisations can express their interest in collaborating with MRI at any time by submitting an application to join the network. If they are already aware of an artist at risk, they can also suggest an artist to be supported by MRI. If going through the open call, the application for an artist to be supported through MRI needs to be submitted by both the artist and the host, and the application will indicate their planned collaboration. On top of the digital application, the host organisation also needs to submit a legally signed and stamped copy of their application. For the application in tandem with the host organisation, the artist is required to find

their own host organisation ahead of time. While MRI does not have the capacity to facilitate or mediate this matching process, Müller explains that established host organisations—particularly those with experience in regions commonly represented by MRI fellows—often have strong networks and may be able to connect new applicants with potential host institutions.

## Selection

An independent jury is appointed by a steering committee of MRI, in line with MRI's rules of procedure. This jury is responsible for reviewing and selecting the applications. It is not publicly specified whether jury members receive compensation for their work or serve on a voluntary basis. The jury typically consists of representatives from the German arts and cultural landscape, but also those involved in civil society working on issues of repression, discrimination and displacement. Jury members may also be familiar with the target groups and bring expertise in a certain cultural field or geographical region relevant to MRI. According to Müller, this can also include people who have experience with displacement or living in exile,

as well as former recipients of an MRI scholarship (when there is no conflict of interest). He further explained that the jury is composed of individuals from diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds to ensure a broad range of perspectives and to prevent bias toward popular art forms, such as film or photography.

The selection process includes an evaluation of the existing threat or risk situation for the artist or cultural actor. Furthermore, it takes into account how well the artist's and host organisation's profiles match and it evaluates whether they fit within the mission of MRI (considering the content, quality and social relevance of their work). Of particular interest is how the artist is able to maintain bridges with their country of origin and how their active participation in their communities will continue, with the support of MRI. Müller highlighted that gender and diversity also play an important role in the selection process, in which they ensure the support for women, as well as LGBTQIA+ artists, and other marginalised and politically repressed groups of society; it is vital to consider the impact of the fellowship on the artist, not only culturally and artistically, but also socially.

# Support for artists

The funding from MRI is awarded to the host organisation, who then uses these funds to support the artist with a monthly stipend and additional financial support for personal expenses throughout their stay in Germany, which can last up to 15 months. The amount per artist is not publicly specified but it can be concluded that it is tailored to the artist's needs and the context of their stay in Germany. In the interview for this case study, Müller indicated that there are generally higher stipends for stays in cities with an expensive housing market, including Munich, Frankfurt, Berlin or Hamburg.

Next to the financial support, artists also receive individual support based on their needs, including health insurance, psychological support, language courses, and support with dealing with visa requests. This in-kind support is also provided by the host organisation, in which staff from the host organisation may accompany the artist on administrative appointments, for example.

Beyond this support, MRI also offers networking trips for fellowship holders (which can last several days), larger networking events for host organisations and fellowship holders, panel



discussions, or financial consultation and specific smaller workshops on topics such as trauma-sensitive work, (digital) security, and more<sup>11</sup>. This ensures that the host organisations become well connected with a network of specialists and are also supported in developing the necessary skills to host an artist who has undergone potentially traumatic experiences in their country of origin. The protective stay in Germany allows artists to allocate time and financial resources to their mental health and reduces the pressure to focus solely on their artistic projects, as explained by a representative of the host organisation [artifact e.V.](#)<sup>12</sup>

Selected artists receive a visa that enables 'the residence, employment and integration

of foreigners in Germany' for the duration of the scholarship with MRI<sup>13</sup>. The visa is tied to the fellowship and therefore does not require employment, only the continuation of artistic work with the support of the stipend. This particular visa also enables the mobility of artists across the European Union, which could, for example, result in performing artists being able to go on tour in the EU or film makers traveling to big film festivals. Furthermore, the host provides professional support to the artist, including networking measures and exchange of experience with other host organisations and scholarship holders. The main role of the host is to provide a safe and supportive workspace for the artist to continue their work, develop their skills and expand their network and community.

## Monitoring and evaluation

At the end of the funding period, fellowship holders are asked to fill out a feedback questionnaire, which helps MRI to further develop and finetune the application process and the overall framework of the programme. A selection of artist testimonials on the MRI website gives deeper insights into how the scholarship has influenced their artistic work. For the host organisations, the feedback is reported through the evidence of use, which is obligatory in the two-stage funding procedure.

The marker of a successful scholarship is one in which the artist or cultural actor was able to continue their artistic work, expand their professional and artistic network, and either return to their country of origin or find a

different opportunity to continue their artistic work in another country. In cases where safe return cannot be guaranteed or where the artist decides not to return, MRI may be considered a 'jump start' for artists to gain access to other residency programmes that offer similar working opportunities for artists in safe spaces.

When comparing MRI to other temporary relocation initiatives, including the [International Cities of Refuge Network](#) (ICORN) or [Writers-in-Exile Programme](#) of the German PEN Center, MRI is distinguished by its strong institutional backing and its dual approach of supporting both artists and host organisations structurally. Operating through a decentralised network of diverse cultural institutions, MRI can offer more

11 Deutscher Bundestag, Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung, [27. Bericht der Bundesregierung über die Auswärtige Kultur- und Gesellschaftspolitik für das Jahr 2023](#) [German Bundestag, Information by the Federal Government, 27<sup>th</sup> Report of the Federal Government on Foreign Cultural and Social Policy for 2023], 20/14599, 11 December 2024, page 20.

12 Martin Roth-Initiative, [YouTube video](#), 5 March 2024.

13 Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz, Bundesamt für Justiz, [Gesetz über den Aufenthalt, die Erwerbstätigkeit und die Integration von Ausländern im Bundesgebiet 1\) \(Aufenthaltsgesetz - AufenthG\) § 7 Aufenthaltserlaubnis](#) [Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection, Federal Office of Justice, Law on the Residence, Employment and Integration of Foreigners in the Federal Territory 1) (Residence Act - AufenthG) Section 7 Residence Permit].

flexibility in terms of length, location and artistic discipline. Additionally, MRI is embedded in Germany's foreign cultural policy<sup>14</sup>, indicating the importance of this programme at the national government level.

In the third Quadrennial Periodic Report on the Implementation of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in and by Germany in the 2016-2019 Reporting Period, the feedback from the first fellowship

holders of MRI already indicated that they felt a greater sense of security and integration in their host country and that they had expanded their creative possibilities. The cooperation with the host institutions was rated as successful, highlighting the 'sustainability-oriented nature of the protective stays and the mutual artistic and professional enrichment'<sup>15</sup>. In this way, fellows of MRI have become ambassadors for a society that is 'committed to culture, peaceful, democratic and cosmopolitan in both the host countries and their home countries'<sup>16</sup>.

## Challenges and limitations

### Funding and processing applications

MRI is funded by the German foreign affairs office, which comes with certain requirements for how the funds are processed. This poses bureaucratic challenges and it takes time to process artist applications. For this reason, MRI cannot act as an acute emergency programme as it has no capacity to accelerate the procedures. In severe cases, MRI is, however, able to refer artists to another relevant emergency programme. Being dependent on public funding also means that potential cuts to the budget for culture could affect the work of ifa and the Goethe-Institut, and consequently the work of MRI.

### Safety of artists

As the artists supported by MRI are all coming from fragile geopolitical contexts, their safety is a number one priority. Authoritarian regimes may be aware of MRI's work and could perceive

its collaboration with artists from their countries as a political threat. This is why working with host organisations makes it easier for an artist to come to Germany, since to the outside, the artist may look like they are 'only on a cultural visit' which is not necessarily publicly linked to MRI. Given these security risks for fellowship holders, not all host organisations are publicly linked to MRI and a full list of host organisations is not made publicly available. This confidentiality also limits the extent to which certain artists and artistic disciplines are visibly represented in connection with the MRI fellowship. Nonetheless, this intentional discretion is essential to safeguarding the well-being and safety of participating artists.

Moreover, MRI may face accusations of 'interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.' Despite this, the initiative remains committed to its mission of supporting the cultural and artistic work of artists at risk. Rooted in the principles of the UN Human Rights Convention, MRI aims

14 See Deutscher Bundestag, Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung 26. Bericht der Bundesregierung zur Auswärtigen Kultur- und Bildungspolitik für das Jahr 2022 [German Bundestag, Information by the Federal Government, [26<sup>th</sup> Report of the Federal Government on Foreign Cultural and Education Policy for 2022](#)], 20/9845, 13 December 2023.

15 German Commission for UNESCO, [Third Quadrennial Periodic Report on the Implementation of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in and by Germany \(2016-2019 reporting period\)](#). UNESCO, 2020.

16 Ibid.

to uphold human rights and support individual artists fleeing repressive environments, an objective reaffirmed by Müller in a 2019 episode of the ifa podcast *Die Kulturmittler*<sup>17</sup>.

## Global political developments

One of the main challenges to the work of MRI remains the global geopolitical situation and growing dominance of right-wing populism and autocratic leaders. This affects the way MRI can plan their programme and how successful the initiative is at getting artists out of specific regions of origin. While artists from any country of origin are welcome to apply (excluding EU citizens), in some regions the geopolitical situation can make it near impossible for an artist to leave their country, which also limits the capacities of MRI to engage with these artists.

## Safe return

A common critique of the MRI, as Müller explained, is that once the protective stay in Germany ends, artists must either return to their country of origin, secure another means to remain in Germany, or seek opportunities in a different country. While it is desirable that an artist may be able to have an impact on

their own community after their protective stay in Germany, a safe return cannot always be guaranteed. The 2020 ifa report *Challenges of Safe Return*<sup>18</sup> explores the reasons why a safe return can be delayed or hindered, including the fact that the conditions for safety might still be unchanged and that the artist would return to the same situation. This is particularly the case for short-term scholarships. As one of the primary threats, the report names the danger for artists to be arrested by authorities upon their return. An additional barrier might be that artists may feel dependent on the host organisation and it becomes a psychological challenge to return to their country of origin.

## Experiences of artists arriving in Germany

Host organisations in Germany have reported that the responsibility of an artist at risk comes with certain challenges. In many cases, the individual comes not only from precarious contexts but may also bring traumatic experiences with them. The challenge for host organisations is to provide adequate support for the artist that goes beyond the administrative burden of hosting an artist, including access to therapy or connecting artists with networks of other diasporic artists, among others<sup>19</sup>.

# Potential development avenues

## Keep building networking spaces

In looking to recommendations for the future of MRI, it is vital to acknowledge the development of the initiative thus far. MRI has been able to support artists in Germany as well as in the

regions of origin, diversify their support offers, and expand their network of partners immensely over the last 8 years. Building on the success of the last years, MRI is able to now function with a broad network of host organisations and fellowship holders, including alumni of

17 Ifa, Schutzprogramme für bedrohte Kulturschaffende, Podcast with Esra Küçük and Maik Müller, '[Die Kulturmittler #05](#)' with Maik Müller, 28 May 2019.

18 Seiden, S., [The Challenges of Safe Return: Supporting Civil Society Actors After Temporary Relocation](#), ifa, 2020.

19 Martin Roth-Initiative, [YouTube video](#), 5 March 2024.

MRI. As further diversification of support offers would be difficult due to limited budgets, a key recommendation is therefore to rely on these valuable networks and to keep bringing together artists and host organisations to learn from each other and share challenges and best practices. This is particularly vital since MRI staff is not able to accompany every individual artist on their stay in Germany, but the network of experienced host organisations and former fellowship holders provide a safe space where exchange and dialogue can happen on a local level.

### Create alternative digital spaces

An example of successful digital spaces for artists at risk was seen in the MRI programme [Residency for Ukrainian Feminist Women Artists](#), starting in October 2024, which connected feminist Ukrainian artists who either could not or did not want to leave the country to work on a common project. It was a vital project that explored feminist discourse and artist-led inquiries on topics such as resilience and the psychosocial effects of living under war. Through this residency of online workshops, discussions and expert meetings, concluding with an offline meeting in March 2025 in Germany, these artists were able to make use of the MRI network and learn from each other. As shared by Müller, the small community of 20 participants is still connected and continues to exchange and create dialogue. A recommendation here is to take the learnings from this fruitful experience and apply them to other fragile contexts where a physical relocation of artists to another country is not possible, but where these digital spaces can provide community and establish first connections.

### Build capacity of host organisations

For MRI's model to be successfully replicated, building the capacity of host organisations is essential. Müller emphasised that it needs to be clearly communicated that the commitment to being a host organisation will require adjustments to their usual work. This may include hiring more staff who are able to accompany the MRI funded artists when dealing with the authorities, or training for staff to be able to handle the additional needs of an artist who may have had traumatic experiences such as living in a war-zone, or having been imprisoned for their art. Host organisations must develop the necessary expertise to provide meaningful, sensitive, and sustained support.

Additionally, the 2022 MRI-commissioned report *An Exercise in Sitting with Discomfort*<sup>20</sup> explores the lived experiences of artists from the Global South relocating to the Global North, including to Germany. The report drew insights from artists supported by MRI as well as those supported by ICORN. Drawing on testimonies from MRI and ICORN fellows, the report highlighted barriers, such as everyday racism, difficulties securing housing, or navigating bureaucracy. In some cases, discrimination even came from host institution staff. Although there is growing awareness of power imbalances, the report noted that formal mechanisms to address them are still lacking. Its recommendations call for a holistic approach to equity and inclusion, grounded in four pillars: individual engagement, interpersonal relationships, institutional practices, and resource allocation.

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<sup>20</sup> Yazaji, R. and Schmidt, M., [An Exercise in Sitting with Discomfort: Towards more equitable support for international relocation in North-South contexts](#). Martin Roth-Initiative and ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen), 2022.

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To fully appreciate the breadth of the research on The Situation of At-Risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals, please do consider reading the [other chapters](#) gathered in this third report, as well as the first two reports available for download: [Intersecting Temporalities: At-Risk and Displaced Artists in Transition – Volume 1 Scoping Review](#) and [Policy and Practice in the EU: Pathways, Impediments, and Patchwork Solutions – Volume 2 Cultural Policy Analysis](#).

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