

Experimental implementation of civic education methods and tools in cooperation with the related subjects at the second level of primary and high schools with emphasis on students' civic competencies

Final evaluation report from the implementation of the project
in the school years 2020/2021, 2021/2022 and 2022/2023

Bratislava 2023



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Introduction

The presented final report outlines the goals, course and results of the *Experimental implementation of civic education methods and tools in cooperation with the related subjects at the second level of primary (ages 11-15) and high schools (ages 15-20) with emphasis on students' civic competencies* which was approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic on June 30, 2020, under number 2020/8988:5-A2130 and which was successfully conducted in the combined, in person and remote learning form in the school years 2020/2021, 2021/2022 and 2022/2023.

Based on research findings, 3 years of experimental experience and observations, it also offers examples of good practices from different types of schools located in different regions of Slovakia, as well as recommendations applicable at the teacher, school, and overall system level. The recommended changes are primarily based on innovations and updates in the field of a methodical approach to civic education, and therefore, they do not pose any financial risks to the state budget associated with the need for material provision of schools and school facilities. We believe that our findings are suitable for nationwide expansion and can serve as an excellent and practical inspiration for other active teachers and headmasters. They bring **key findings** that we consider to be **fundamental and even critical for today's generation of children and young people**, the entire society and the subject itself, providing an opportunity for more effective and meaningful civic education. Specifically:

1. The quality and focus of civic education have a direct (positive or negative) impact on the development of students' higher cognitive abilities, i.e., to achieve its educational goal in the form of civic attitudes and students' capacity to take action,
2. There is a correlation between the choice of appropriate and innovative methods and educational tools and the practical added value of civic education as a subject, which directly increases the motivation and attitude of students to this subject.
3. In this context, the students perceive the possibility of an open and respectful exchange of opinions and the development of mutual understanding as a benefit, which are acute needs of today's world.

When we talk about pupils and students (hereinafter as students), teachers, or headmasters in the report, we mean male and female students, male and female teachers, and male and female headmasters. We wish that the results and findings collected within the project serve all headmasters, teachers, students, or professionals with an interest in civic education, regardless of their knowledge, social, financial, cultural, religious and other backgrounds, fully adapting to the diversity of their users.

The goal and basic pillars of experimental testing

The project of experimental testing in the subject of civic education was created in the context of a critically low level of civic values and competencies of students in primary and secondary schools, which include, for example, the ability to think critically and evaluate information, the ability and interest to participate in community life, the ability to respect human dignity, the individual value of each person, or gender equality, as well as the ability to perceive the events around us in broader, and even global, contexts, and to protect the environment. Over the past 3 years, this risk has been exacerbated both by the absence of systemic solutions, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crises.



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Last year, the Slovak Youth Council, based on its representative survey of a sample of 1,005 young people, stated that in the self-assessment of knowledge in civic education - which, however, forms only part of the key preparation for a citizen's life in a democracy - the respondents themselves would give themselves an average grade of 3, with 1 being the best and 5 the worst ([RmS, 2022](#)). In general, young people feel unheard and marginalized by the state (ibid.).

Given that the objective of the experimental testing is, according to §14 of Act no. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act) and on the amendment of some laws as amended, to "*obtain and verify knowledge, experience, ideas or foreign models in the field of education and training and their subsequent application in practice*", our project provided space for practical verification of new and traditional knowledge, opportunities and experiences from Slovakia and abroad in the subject of civic education and in cooperation with related subjects, i.e. with history, art and culture, regional education, geography, ethics or religious education, etc., but also in connection with the method of assessment and providing feedback to students or with the activities of school parliaments and school life as such. In this area, our attention was mainly focused on the methods and means of implementing civic education in lessons and at the level of the school climate.

The goals of the implemented project reflect on the current State Education Program of Slovakia, whose performance and content standards **help achieve more effective**, and at the same time on the content-relevant goals of the new State Education Program for Primary Education.

The basic **measures**, which were introduced in 3 experimental classes in cooperation with school management and responsible teachers, include:

- Identification of common problems or topics across related subjects, including their time alignment, so that they can communicate with each other and cooperate in order to achieve a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary effect of the educational process,
- Prioritizing education for democratic citizenship with regard to current societal needs and challenges (e.g. development of critical thinking and media literacy, mitigation of hate speech, etc.),
- The introduction of innovative methodological approaches and educational tools within the currently valid innovative State Education Program, or performance and content educational standards in the subject of civic education for each grade of primary and secondary schools,
- Incorporation of extracurricular activities into school life and outside it, including the connection of students, teaching and non-teaching staff, school management, parents or grandparents and the wider community of the school, town/city and region,
- Activating school parliaments so that they democratically represent the interests of students and participate in important issues of the school's life and the broader community of the school and town/city,
- Involvement of teachers in the creative didactic-methodical processes and in the process of updating methodological approaches and educational tools directly at their school, including their



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continuous support in further education and own personal innovation,

- Innovation of the methods and process of student assessment towards formative assessment, i.e., verbal assessment, or a combination of formative and summative assessment formats.

These measures were in the first year of the experiment, i.e., in the 2020/2021 school year, formulated into a draft of the so-called Experimental curriculum for quality civic education (for the purposes of this project), which was then practically tested directly in the participating schools. Teaching adhered to the following **principles**:

- Pedagogical emphasis on higher cognitive abilities,
- Comprehensive development of civic competencies based on the principle of gradual accumulation at the levels of *knowledge - skills - values - attitudes - capacity to take action*.
- Connecting the curriculum to practical life and current life and social issues,
- Beutelbach consensus, openness of thinking and independence in forming one's own opinion,
- Problem-based learning,
- Learning "about" democracy "in" the democratic school environment and with the aim of learning "for" life in democracy,
- Independence and empowerment of teachers and students to adapt the educational process to their own interests and needs towards self-realization.

We are convinced that by implementing the above-mentioned changes, the subject of civic education has both effectively moved closer to its long-term vision formulated in the content and performance standards of the subject, and has regained **the status of an important, relevant and meaningful subject** in the eyes of both *teachers* and *students* and thus ensuring its future. The conclusions from our observations correspond with the qualitative and quantitative results of the experimental research measurement (see below).

Organization and course of experimental testing

Experimental testing took place continuously during 3 school years, namely in the years 2020/2021, 2021/2022 and 2022/2023, at 3 involved experimental schools, where proper experimental teaching and complex research took place:

- Private Elementary School, Ružová 14, 974 11 Banská Bystrica,
- M.M. Hodža Grammar School in Liptovský Mikuláš, M.M. Hodžu 860/9, 031 01 Liptovský Mikuláš,
- and Secondary Technical School of Transport, Sokolská 911/94, 960 01 Zvolen,

and 3 control schools whose task was to engage in control research:

- Nábřežná Elementary School, Nábřežná 95, 940 57 Nové Zámky,
- Bilingual Grammar School, T. Ružičku 3, 010 01 Žilina,
- Secondary Vocational School of Woodworking, Lučenecká cesta 2193/17, 960 01 Zvolen.

The research team also included:

- The Department of Ethics and Civic Education of the Faculty of Education at Comenius University in Bratislava as a guarantor of experimental testing,



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- The Institute for Active Citizenship as the coordinator of professional activities.

The project team has collaborated in a full online format for an extended period. The organization of experimental teaching took place during the COVID-19 pandemic according to the current anti-pandemic measures and guidelines, after their end in the classic in-person form, or at the discretion of the management of the particular school and the experimenting teacher. All research activities took place in an online environment. At the same time, the guarantor and coordinator of professional activities were involved only in relation to the involved schools, while the educational process, in terms of content and methodology, was fully ensured and created by the teachers themselves.

The project activities were mostly carried out at the expense of the members of the research team, i.e. either with the consent of employers or in their free time. Thanks to the inner conviction and willingness of the involved teachers and colleagues, the activities were fully implemented despite the absence of financial coverage. The costs of the preparation of the research activities and the implementation of one-time training for teachers within the project (both in the academic year 2021/2022) were financially supported by the Pontis Foundation with a donation of €5,000. The estimated value of personnel and professional capacities invested in the project during 3 school years is approximately €60,000. This amount does not include the costs associated with the normal operation of the participating schools.

Results and research findings

The results and impact of the experimental testing project were monitored and measured using a **combination of qualitative and quantitative methods**, focusing on students, parents, teachers and management of the experimental groups, and students and parents of the control groups. The main research aim was to find out, through interim and final measurement, how successfully the implementation of the so-called “Experimental curriculum for quality civic education” (available on demand, also hereinafter referred to as "intervention") in experimental classes managed to achieve demonstrable improvements in the monitored indicators.

Based on the analysis of primary **quantitative data** obtained in the form of anonymized interactive online questionnaires, we reached the following findings in selected key areas:

Active citizenship

- In the field of active citizenship, the experimental intervention brought a significant effect, mainly in the field of **volunteering**. It turned out that the school plays an important role not only in imparting knowledge about volunteering but also in initiating volunteering activities. Students who were involved in the experiment pointed to the active role of the school in leading them toward volunteer activities.
- The intervention also had a positive impact on the understanding of the importance of the municipal or city council for the citizens, contributing to a strengthened connection of **the local government** with the life of the community of which it is a part.

Tolerance

- The research data showed a significant positive impact of the innovative intervention on **tolerance** towards diversity, acting as a prevention of **hatred** and the deepening of negative attitudes towards minorities.

- It can also be concluded that the intervention in civic education has brought a certain degree of sensitivity to the situation in the area of **gender inequality**, especially in the persistent salary differences between men and women in Slovakia.
- We also noted a higher level of understanding of the issue of **prejudices and stereotypes** in connection with ethnicity or race, or gender. Despite the positive results shown by the data, the comprehensibility of the issue still has reserves, and the proportion of students who have little or no knowledge of the issue is still relatively high.

Democracy at school

- A negative finding is undoubtedly the observed decline in the positive assessment of the usefulness of the **school parliament**, regardless of whether the group had experience with the intervention. It is possible to assume that the situation was also caused by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which affected the possibility of fully implementing its activities or otherwise acting on the side of the school parliament. This resulted in limited visibility, but also the usefulness of the parliament's activities. However, the experimental intervention in the project only took place at one of the participating schools, so this result is not sufficiently representative.
- The experimental intervention also brought about an increase in agreement with statements about **the collaborative approach** of teachers, as well as an increase in the rate of declaring discussions on politics with the teacher during civic education lessons.

Assessment or grading

- Grading positively motivates less than half of the respondents, the situation in opinions about grading did not change even after the experience with the intervention.
- A deeper look into these opinions shows a high degree of agreement with the opinions that grades reflect the results of the student's efforts, a prevailing **positive attitude towards verbal assessment**, as well as a strongly prevailing opinion on **the practical usefulness** of knowledge from the subject of civic education. The innovative intervention brought an increase in the share of positive attitudes in all monitored aspects. The situation in the control group developed in the opposite direction, a significant decrease occurred mainly in the assessment of the usefulness of the subject.
- In the experimental lessons, the students most appreciated **the discussion, teaching and testing methods** and interesting **topics** that were covered in the lessons.

Support in the family

- Respondents from the experimental group declared a higher level of support from the family. At the end of the project, the situation in the control group worsened significantly.
- Approximately half of the respondents in both groups regularly **discuss** social or political topics at home. The intervention did not bring significant changes in this case.

Information

- Students reflected on the relevant **political context**, which resonated in public opinion in the respective data collection period. During the final stage of data collection, connected with the technocratic government entrusted with managing the country before the early elections, it became clear that the students reflected on political events less intensively, or that they picked up less information from politics.
- The recorded changes indicate a decrease in the rate of monitoring of political information, regardless of the experience with the experimental form of teaching. As this state can be



influenced by several external factors, e.g., current political agenda, it does not necessarily mean a decrease in students' interest in political events or an inappropriately chosen form of teaching.

- Students talk about **the news** most often **with their parents**, at the end of the project, the proportion of respondents who do not talk about news with anyone increased in both groups. In all stages of the research, teachers had **a minimal share** in these interviews.
- The experimental intervention did not bring changes in the structure of information sources either. They are steadily dominated by **internet search engines and social networks**.
- On the other hand, social networks have the lowest trust of the respondents. Teachers are trustworthy for about a third of the respondents. In the group with experimental experience, there was a decrease **in trust** in peers and social networks, which may indicate a positive effect of the educational program.

Better life in our country

- From the point of view of experience with experimental teaching, it turns out that students who have had experience with it focus more on **individual perspectives**. It does not necessarily mean a turn to egoism, it can also be an attempt to solve broader social problems through changes in one's way of life and attitude, as we often see, for example in the response of young people to the climate crisis. On the other hand, we see that the intervention did not prevent the increase in resignation.
- The control group was slightly different from the starting point, here we observed a greater **orientation towards the community and society** than in the experimental group. The share of resigned students is practically the same in both groups.

What makes our country worse

- The group of students who had experience with the intervention tends to identify the country's problems more **at the system level** than the control group (corruption, economy, etc.).

Active citizen

- The most frequently mentioned characteristic of an ideal citizen in both groups at the beginning of the project was "positive relationship to the community", the second most frequent was "wisdom". At the end of the project, these responses "switched" places, so to speak, but they still dominate the notions of an active citizen. Considering the similarities between both research groups of students, it can be concluded that these changes are not related to the experimental intervention.

Very interesting insights are also offered by the analysis of primary, equally anonymized, **qualitative data**, which were collected using online interviews and focus groups.

Based on individual and group interviews, we can state **positive experiences with the implementation of experimental testing** at the involved schools, more precisely with the used methods and means of experiential and non-formal learning. In all 3 participating schools, the project also had **strong support from the school management**, not only in terms of creating the conditions for its implementation but also in terms of the attitude towards innovations.

The teachers' experience with experimental methods is positive, despite varying degrees of previous experience. The involved teachers successfully applied a relatively **wide range of methods** and educational tools. The students themselves also reflect positively on the use of these methods. What unites everyone is **the importance of discussion**, which has become the focal point for practically all



respondents. Civic education as a subject provides an ideal space not only for confronting opinions but also for the overall cultivation of discussion and the acquisition of skills for participating in it. The teacher's ability to create a **safe, respectful and supportive environment** for all students in the class, regardless of their opinions, also appears to be a key factor.

Successfully used and applied experimental methods and means thus **bring change** in:

- **The overall attitude of students** towards civic education, for whom it becomes an interesting and practically usable subject,
- Students' attitude towards learning the subject itself, students are more interested and more **active during lessons**,
- Opinions on social and political topics, often **forming an opinion** on issues that students have not previously encountered, understood, or thought about, thus gaining a "new perspective through better understanding/knowledge",
- **Classroom atmosphere**, where the activities during class contribute to students to get to know each other better and understand each other, but also in the student-teacher relationship,
- Skills, as activities with an emphasis on discussion and interaction improve mainly (but not only) **communication and interpersonal skills**.

An interesting situation arose regarding the reflection on experiences with **verbal assessment**- it is accepted more positively by students than by teachers. From the point of view of the teachers, not only mastering verbal assessment but also the assessment of the level of knowledge acquired by the students appears to be a big challenge. However, grading can also be seen as the last saving grace of the importance of the subject in terms of students' access.

As part of the experimental testing, one of the participating schools also focused on changes in the activities of the **school parliament**. By increasing independence (autonomy) and strengthening the individual and collective responsibility of its members, the originally so-called "fun" agenda to "serious topics" mainly related to solving problems that arise at school. This shift is perceived by the school management, the parliament coordinator, as well as the students. In this case, the negative reflection of the members of the school parliament contradicts this positive assessment. This raises questions about the possibilities and needs of further systematic work aimed at strengthening the skills of school parliament coordinators, as well as the need to identify suitable methods of support (coaching, mentoring) for school parliament members. It is also important to understand **the burden** that such involvement in the school environment means for students.

As part of the project, none of the involved schools had a deeper connection with the wider community, be it parents, local or regional self-government, other schools, etc. In this sense, experimental teaching, with few exceptions, was mainly an internal agenda within the normal life of the school. The intensity of involvement in extracurricular activities did not change, if only at the individual level. The willingness to link subjects with each other is also weak.

The analysis of qualitative data pointed to the following factors that influence the successful application of innovative methods in relation to the achieved changes within the project. As **activators**, or circumstances that facilitate and **accelerate the process of change**, based on the data obtained, we have identified:



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- The positive attitude of the management towards innovations in teaching,
- Positive attitude of the teacher, willingness to learn new methods and acquire new skills,
- Good orientation of the teacher in the methods and possibilities of their application,
- The teacher's respectful approach to students and their opinions,
- The changing needs of children in connection with technological progress, i.e., students' demand for an innovative approach and the need for space for discussion.

On the contrary, we have identified **blockers**, i.e. circumstances that **slow down or even inhibit the process of change**, in the following areas:

- The negative attitude of teachers (or school management) towards innovations in teaching in general,
- Dismissive attitude of students, potentially related to previous negative experiences,
- Performance expectations of external actors (parents, employers, etc.), insufficient understanding of the importance of non-formal education and problematic recognition of its results,
- Individualistic school culture,
- Inadequate perception of the importance of civic education as a subject, its relegation to the periphery, both by students and teachers,
- Not using the potential of synergy between subjects and projects that are ongoing at the school.

Of the externalities that could significantly affect the course and results of project implementation, the transition to **remote learning** due to pandemic restrictions should be mentioned in this context. This period was assessed as demanding by both students and teachers and therefore did not provide a full-fledged space for the implementation of **experiential and non-formal learning methods**.

Evaluation of established hypotheses

The findings presented above offer a closer look at the importance of updating the civic education subject in terms of the methods and educational tools used, but also the cross-subject and thematic connection to other subjects or extracurricular activities.

The overall evaluation of the research results and findings obtained during the 3 years of implementation of the experimental testing also offers an evaluation of the 5 hypotheses that the project established at its beginning. Below we present the full text of the hypotheses, as well as their evaluation in relation to the research results:

- I. **Hypothesis 1:** We assume that the proposed and verified innovative methodological procedures and educational practices in teaching civic education lead to the development of key civic competencies of students more effectively than the currently applied, conventional procedures.

Research data show several positive changes on the part of students who completed the experimental intervention compared to those who did not have the opportunity to complete this form of teaching. Changes are manifested in attitudes towards sensitive topics (minorities, inequality), as well as in the civic activity of students. In this sense, we can **confirm the hypothesis**.

- II. **Hypothesis 2:** We assume that students from the experimental group will demonstrate a stronger link between acquired knowledge in the subjects of civic education, history, art and culture, ethical



education and geography and attitudes towards the desired state compared to students from the control group.

Based on the data analysis, we can conclude that students from the experimental group showed a higher degree of tolerance overall, the ability to recognize the causes of social phenomena (such as inequalities) and also showed a higher degree of caution with information sources. In addition, the analysis of spontaneous responses makes it possible to talk more about the experimental group as a group of better-informed citizens with the ability to perceive the wider context of various political and social phenomena. In this sense, we can **confirm the hypothesis**.

- III. **Hypothesis 3:** We assume that the introduction of extracurricular activities into the school's life and the improvement of the activity of the Student Parliament, or the Student School Council, contributes to the development of students' civic competencies and the improvement of the democratic climate at school.

Student School Board, or the School Parliament can be an important factor that affects the overall atmosphere at school, the feeling of acceptance, but also interest in the students' problems. In addition, it is fully perceived by the students as their representative structure in relation to the school and its management. In this context, we consider it important to point out that the implementation of the project was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting in-person teaching, which had a negative impact on the implementation of its activities. The evaluation of the school parliament and its contribution probably worsened for this reason as well. However, the experimental intervention took place in only one of the three participating schools, so this result cannot be generalized. We can conclude that the project was not successful concerning this type of activity, therefore this hypothesis cannot be **confirmed or rejected**.

- IV. **Hypothesis 4:** The innovation of the process of evaluating students contributes to the development of their higher cognitive abilities, and thus also their civic competencies.

Experimental research has shown that the majority of students do not have a positive attitude towards grading, or do not see it as a motivating evaluation system. Among the students who had experience with the innovative intervention, there was an increase in positive attitudes towards verbal assessment. More often, we also observe a stronger attachment to the subject, as well as an increase in the perception of the usefulness of civic education as such. In this sense, we can **confirm the hypothesis**.

- V. **Hypothesis 5:** We assume that students from the experimental group will show an overall higher level of civic competencies compared to students from the control group.

Overall, it can be concluded that the students of the experimental group show better information and understanding of the issue in several monitored aspects, but also a higher level of civic activity. In this sense, we can therefore **confirm the hypothesis**.



Lessons from experimental testing

The experimental verification project was very complex, both in terms of preparation and implementation, as well as research and evaluation. In addition to the complexity of the approach, its **strengths** undoubtedly included the following aspects:

- Duration of cooperation for 3 years, in addition in the context of long-term cooperation between the involved partners,
- The creation of an experimental curriculum design, methods and means of its implementation directly by the innovative teachers themselves, i.e. using **the principle "teachers to teachers"**,
- The course of the project directly in the environment of experimental schools,
- **A wide range** of educational goals, methods and means implemented by the involved teachers, their reflection on current social challenges and the individual needs of students and the mutual sharing of these experiences within the micro-team,
- Cooperation and open discussion about the progress and results of the experimental verification with the students themselves, parents and management of the schools involved,
- Involvement of **control schools** with the same socio-demographic profile in the implementation of research measurements of the impact of the experimental intervention,
- The potential for generalizing the knowledge and innovations gained in the project and their successful dissemination to other schools in Slovakia, in such a way that they can **freely adapt the collected examples of good practice to the needs** of their school and students or to the pedagogical style of the teacher,
- **The low cost of the proposed changes** and improvements without the need for any one-time or long-term investments or other form of support from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic, the founder of the school or the school itself,
- And thus, the possibility of **quick and simple implementation with a positive impact** on the quality of the educational process in the subject of civic education.

At the level of expert discussion on the further improvement of teaching in the subject of civic education, we also perceive these **3 key moments**, which have proven to be fundamental and even critical for today's generation of children and young people, as well as for the entire society, and thus for the subject as such. The good news is that with an appropriately chosen educational approach, these critical places can be transformed into opportunities for more effective, meaningful and activating civic education. They are:

4. First, direct (positive or negative) the impact of the quality and focus of civic education on civic attitudes and student activation, i.e. **higher cognitive abilities**, which are, or rather should be, the essence of civic education,
5. Secondly, the proven connection between the use of appropriate and innovative methods and educational tools and **the practical usefulness of the subject** "for life", which, according to the respondents, directly improves the students' **relationship** with the subject and their **motivation** to cooperate with the teacher during the educational process,
6. Thirdly, **the possibility of an open and cultured exchange of opinions**, discussion and better mutual understanding as a benefit that the subject of civic education - again, in the case of using appropriate methods and means - brings and which appears to be an **extremely acute need of** today's world at the local and global level.



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Conclusion

The multi-sector research team of the *Experimental implementation of civic education methods and tools in cooperation with the related subjects at the second level of primary and high schools with emphasis on students' civic competencies* over the past 3 school years created and research-verified a complex methodological and curricular tool for quality improvement and the streamlining of civic education subject in primary and secondary schools of various specializations. On the one hand, it **corresponds, in terms of value, to the currently ongoing curricular reform** in Slovakia, but on the other hand, it aims even more in-depth, as regards to the development of democratic civic competencies and the activation of younger and older students, as it is necessary to achieve a comprehensive change in this area to educate responsible citizens. The results of the project thus offer solutions for current and prospective threats to democracy at the level of the civic education subject, school climate, organization of teaching and school life, or support for the participation of students, staff and other school residents.

The individual methodological tools offered, as well as the inspiring research conclusions, are also applicable from the position of individual active teachers, right here and now, and systemically and strategically from the position of state administration and regional government. In terms of the effects of the proposed material, the application of the findings of the experimental testing project in question **will not have a negative impact on the budget** of the public administration, the business environment, the informatization of society, or public administration services for the citizens. We expect a positive impact on the environment and the social sphere in the long term.



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