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# Let Russia Be Russia

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## The Case for a More Pragmatic Approach to Moscow

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*Thomas Graham*

Since the end of the Cold War, every U.S. president has come into office promising to build better relations with Russia—and each one has watched that vision evaporate. The first three—Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—set out to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic community and make it a partner in building a global liberal order. Each left office with relations in worse shape than he found them, and with Russia growing ever more distant.

President Donald Trump pledged to establish a close partnership with Vladimir Putin. Yet his administration has only toughened the more confrontational approach that the Obama administration adopted after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Russia remains entrenched in Ukraine, is opposing the United States in Europe and the Middle East with increasing brazenness, and continues to interfere in U.S. elections. As relations have soured, the risk of a military conflict has grown.

U.S. policy across four administrations has failed because, whether conciliatory or confrontational, it has rested on a persistent illusion: that the right U.S. strategy could fundamentally change Russia's sense of its own interests and basic worldview. It was misguided to ground U.S. policy in the assumption that Russia would join the community of liberal democratic nations, but it was also misguided to imagine that a more aggressive approach could compel Russia to abandon its vital interests.

A better approach must start from the recognition that relations between Washington and Moscow have been fundamentally competitive from the moment the United States emerged as a global power at the end of the nineteenth century, and they remain so today. The two

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*Team of rivals: Putin and Trump at the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, July 2017*

countries espouse profoundly different concepts of world order. They pursue opposing goals in regional conflicts such as those in Syria and Ukraine. The republican, democratic tradition of the United States stands in stark contrast to Russia's long history of autocratic rule. In both practical and ideological terms, a close partnership between the two states is unsustainable.

In the current climate, that understanding should come naturally to most U.S. policymakers. Much harder will be to recognize that ostracizing Russia will achieve little and likely prove to be counterproductive. Even if its relative power declines, Russia will remain a key player in the global arena thanks to its large nuclear arsenal, natural resources, geographic centrality in Eurasia, UN Security Council veto, and highly skilled population. Cooperating with Russia is essential to grappling with critical global challenges such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism. With the exception of China, no country affects more issues of strategic and economic importance to the United States than Russia. And no other country, it must be said, is capable of destroying the United States in 30 minutes.

A more balanced strategy of restrained competition would not only reduce the risk of nuclear war but also provide the framework for the cooperation needed to tackle global challenges. Smarter relations with Russia can help guarantee European security and strategic stability,

bring a modicum of order to the Middle East, and manage the rise of China. As U.S. policymakers demand that Russia moderate its behavior, they must be prepared to scale back their near-term goals, especially in settling the crisis in Ukraine, to forge a more productive relationship with Moscow.

Above all, U.S. policymakers will need to see Russia plainly, without sentiment or ideology. A new Russia strategy must dispense with the magical thinking of previous administrations and instead seek incremental gains that advance long-term U.S. interests. Rather than trying to persuade Moscow to understand its own interests differently, Washington must demonstrate that those interests can be more safely pursued through both considered competition and cooperation with the United States.

### **END OF THE ILLUSION**

Washington's initial post-Cold War emphasis on partnership and integration fundamentally misread the reality in Russia, positing that the country was in the midst of a genuine democratic transition and that it was too weak to resist U.S. policies. To be sure, the premise that Russia was shedding its authoritarian past did not appear unreasonable in the early 1990s. In the U.S. view, the Cold War had ended with the triumph of Western democracy over Soviet totalitarianism. The former Soviet bloc countries began to democratize after the revolutions of 1989. The rising forces of globalization fed the belief that free-market democracy was the pathway to prosperity and stability in the decades ahead. The leaders of the new Russia—President Boris Yeltsin and the dynamic young reformers around him—declared their commitment to sweeping political and economic reforms.

Yet even in the 1990s, there were signs that these assumptions were wrong. Contrary to the dominant Western narrative, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked not a democratic breakthrough but the victory of Yeltsin, a populist, over Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who ironically was a more committed democrat, having overseen what remain the freest and fairest elections in Russian history. Russia had few enduring native democratic traditions to draw from and only a shaky sense of political community on which to base a well-functioning democracy. To make matters worse, the state institutions fell prey to rapacious oligarchs and regional barons. Ruthless cliques competed, often violently, to carve up the assets of



a once totally nationalized economy. Political chaos spread as old-time Communists and Soviet patriots battled more progressive forces.

The disorder intensified throughout the 1990s to the point that many observers feared Russia would crumble, just as the Soviet Union had earlier in the decade. The task of restoring order fell to Yeltsin's successor, Putin. Even as he packaged his plans in democratic rhetoric, Putin made clear in a document called "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium" (released on December 30, 1999) that he intended to return to the traditional Russian model of a strong, highly centralized authoritarian state. "Russia," he wrote, "will not soon, if ever, become a version of the United States or England, where liberal values have deep historical roots. . . . For Russians, a strong and sturdy state is not an anomaly to be resisted. To the contrary, it is the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and driver of any change."

U.S. officials were not blind to the obstacles to democratic reform or to Putin's intentions, but in the afterglow of the Cold War victory, they insisted that partnership with Russia had to be grounded in shared democratic values; mere common interests would not suffice. To build public support for its policies, each administration assured Americans that Russia's leaders were committed to democratic reforms and processes. From the 1990s on, the White House measured the success of its approach in large part in terms of Russia's progress toward becoming a stronger and more functional democracy, an uncertain enterprise over which the United States had little influence. Not surprisingly, the strategy collapsed when it proved impossible to bridge the gap between that illusion and Russia's increasingly authoritarian reality. For Clinton, the moment of truth came when Yeltsin installed a new government of conservatives and Communists after the 1998 financial collapse in Russia; for Bush, it came when Putin cracked down on civil society in reaction to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004; and for Obama, it came when Putin announced in 2011 that, after having served as prime minister, he would reclaim the presidency.

The second flawed premise—that Russia lacked the strength to challenge the United States—also appeared sensible in the early post-Soviet years. Russia's economy contracted by nearly 40 percent between 1991 and 1998. The once feared Red Army, starved of investment, became a shadow of its former self. Russia was dependent on Western financial support to keep both its economy and its government afloat. In these circumstances, the Clinton administration

for the most part got its way, intervening in the Balkans and expanding NATO without serious pushback from Russia.

This premise, however, became less plausible as Russia's economy rapidly recovered after Putin took office and restored order by clamping down on the oligarchs and regional barons. He subsequently launched a concerted effort to modernize the military. Yet the Bush administration, convinced of Washington's unparalleled might in the "unipolar moment," showed little respect for renewed Russian power. Bush withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, expanded NATO further, and welcomed the so-called color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, with their anti-Russian overtones. Similarly, the Obama administration, although less certain of American power, still dismissed Russia. As the upheavals of the Arab Spring unfolded in 2011, Obama declared that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a Russian client, had to go. Washington also paid little heed to Russia's objections when the United States and its allies exceeded the terms of the UN Security Council-backed intervention in Libya, turning a mandate to protect an endangered population into an operation to overthrow the country's strongman, Muammar al-Qaddafi.

Both the Bush and the Obama administrations were brought crashing down to earth. The Russian incursion into Georgia in 2008 demonstrated to the Bush administration that Russia had a veto over NATO expansion in the guise of the use of force. Similarly, Russia's seizure of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine in 2014 shocked the Obama administration, which had earlier welcomed the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian Ukrainian president. A year later, Russia's military intervention in Syria saved Assad from imminent defeat at the hands of U.S.-backed rebels.

### **WILL TO POWER**

Today, nearly everyone in Washington has dropped the pretense that Russia is on the path to democracy, and the Trump administration considers Russia to be a strategic competitor. These are overdue course corrections. Yet the current strategy of punishing and ostracizing Russia is also flawed. Beyond the obvious point that the United States cannot isolate Russia against the wishes of such major powers as China and India, this strategy makes some grave mistakes.

For one thing, it exaggerates Russian power and demonizes Putin, turning relations into a zero-sum struggle in which the only acceptable outcome of any dispute is Russia's capitulation. But Putin's foreign



policy has been less successful than advertised. His actions in Ukraine, aimed at preventing that country's westward drift, have only tied Ukraine more closely to the West while refocusing NATO on its original mission of containing Russia. Putin's meddling in U.S. elections has complicated relations with the United States, which Russia needs to normalize to win greater foreign investment and to create a long-term alternative to its excessive strategic dependence on China.

In the absence of concerted Western action, Putin has inserted Russia as a major player in many geopolitical conflicts, most notably in Syria. Nevertheless, Putin has yet to demonstrate that he can bring any conflict to an end that consolidates Russia's gains. At a time of economic stagnation and spreading socioeconomic discontent, his activist foreign policy now risks overstretch. In these circumstances, Putin needs to retrench. And that imperative should open up possibilities for the United States to turn to diplomacy and reduce the burden of competition with Russia while protecting U.S. interests.

Another flaw in the current strategy is that it imagines Russia as a pure kleptocracy, whose leaders are motivated principally by a desire to preserve their wealth and ensure their survival. To work, this policy assumes that sanctioned officials and oligarchs will pressure Putin to change his policy in Ukraine, for example, or unwind Russia's interference in American domestic politics. Nothing of the sort has happened because Russia is more like a patrimonial state, in which personal wealth and social position are ultimately dependent on the good graces of those in power.

U.S. policymakers are also guilty of not reckoning seriously with Russia's desire to be perceived as a great power. Russia is indeed weak by many measures: its economy is a fraction of the size of the U.S. economy, its population is unhealthy by U.S. standards, and its investment in the high-tech sector is far below U.S. levels. But Russian leaders cling to the conviction that to survive, their country must be a great power—one of the few countries that determine the structure, substance, and direction of world affairs—and they are prepared to endure great ordeals in pursuit of that status. That mindset has driven Russia's global conduct since Peter the Great brought his realm into Europe more than 300 years ago. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian leaders have focused on restoring Russia's great-power

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*Putin's foreign policy has been less successful than advertised.*

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status, just as their predecessors did after the national humiliation of the Crimean War in the 1850s and then again after the demise of the Russian empire in 1917. As Putin wrote two decades ago, “For the first time in the past two to three centuries, [Russia] risks sliding to the second, and possibly even third, echelon of world states. To prevent this, we must exert all our intellectual, physical, and moral forces. . . . Everything depends on our ability to grasp the dimensions of the threat, to rally together, and to commit to this long and difficult task.”

Part of that task is countering the United States, which Putin sees as the primary obstacle to Russia’s great-power aspirations. In contrast to what it imagines as Washington’s unipolar ambitions, the Kremlin insists on the existence of a multipolar world. More concretely, Russia has sought to undermine Washington’s standing by checking U.S. interests in Europe and the Middle East and has tried to tarnish the United States’ image as a paragon of democratic virtue by interfering in its elections and exacerbating domestic discord.

### **RUSSIA’S WORLD**

In its quest for great-power status, Russia poses specific geopolitical challenges to the United States. These challenges stem from Russia’s age-old predicament of having to defend a vast, sparsely settled, multiethnic country located on a landmass that lacks formidable physical barriers and that abuts either powerful states or unstable territories. Historically, Russia has dealt with this challenge by maintaining tight control domestically, creating buffer zones on its borders, and preventing the emergence of a strong coalition of rival powers. Today, this approach invariably runs against U.S. interests in China, Ukraine, Europe, and the Middle East.

No part of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has loomed larger in the Russian imagination than Ukraine, which is strategically positioned as a pathway into the Balkans and central Europe, blessed with tremendous economic potential, and hailed by Russians as the cradle of their own civilization. When a U.S.-supported popular movement in 2014 threatened to rip Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit, the Kremlin seized Crimea and instigated a rebellion in the eastern region of the Donbas. What the West considered a flagrant violation of international law, the Kremlin saw as self-defense.

When they look at Europe in its entirety, Russian leaders see at once a concrete threat and a stage for Russian greatness. In practical terms, the steps Europe took toward political and economic consolidation



raised the prospect of an enormous entity on Russia's borders that, like the United States, would dwarf Russia in population, wealth, and power. Psychologically, Europe remains central to Russia's great-power sensibilities. For the past three centuries, Russia has demonstrated its prowess on Europe's great battlefields and through its grand diplomatic conferences. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, for example, it was the Russian emperor Alexander I who received the key to the city of Paris. Europe's consolidation and the continued expansion of NATO have had the effect of pushing Russia out of Europe and diminishing its voice in continental affairs. And so the Kremlin has accelerated efforts to exploit the fault lines within and between European states and to stoke doubts in vulnerable NATO members about their allies' commitment to collective defense.

In the Middle East, Russia has returned after an absence of some 30 years. At first, Putin intervened in Syria both to protect a long-standing client and to prevent the victory of radical Islamist forces with ties to extremists inside Russia. But after saving Assad and seeing the absence of a strong U.S. role, his ambitions grew. Russia decided to use the Middle East as an arena to showcase its great-power credentials. Largely bypassing the UN-sponsored peacemaking process, in which the United States is a central player, Russia has teamed up with Iran and Turkey to seek a final political resolution of the crisis in Syria. To reduce the risk of a direct conflict between Iran and Israel, Russia has strengthened its diplomatic ties to Israel. It has rebuilt relations with Egypt and worked with Saudi Arabia to manage oil prices.

It has also grown closer to China in developing a strategic counterbalance to the United States. This relationship has helped Russia resist the United States in Europe and the Middle East, but the greater concern for Washington should be how it enhances Beijing's capabilities. Russia has aided China's commercial penetration of Central Asia and, to a lesser extent, Europe and the Middle East. It has given China access to natural resources at favorable prices and has sold the country sophisticated military technology. In short, Russia is abetting China's rise as a formidable competitor to the United States.

Moscow's more assertive foreign policy today is a reflection not of the country's growing strength—in absolute terms, its power hasn't increased much—but of the perception that U.S. disarray has magnified Russia's relative power. The country's behavior is also driven by a persistent fear that guides Russian foreign policy: the sense that in the long



run, Russia will fall dangerously behind both the United States and China. The Russian economy is stagnating, and even official projections see little hope for improvement in the next ten years. Russia cannot invest as much as its two competitors in the critical technologies, such as artificial intelligence, bioengineering, and robotics, that will shape the character of power in the future. Putin may be pressing hard now, at the time of Russia's heightened relative power, to better position the country in the new multipolar world order he sees emerging.

### **BETWEEN ACCOMMODATION AND RESISTANCE**

The challenge Russia now poses to the United States does not echo the existential struggle of the Cold War. Rather, the contest is a more limited competition between great powers with rival strategic imperatives and interests. If the United States was able to reach accommodations with the Soviet Union to strengthen global peace and security while advancing American interests and values, surely it can do the same with Russia today.

Beginning in Europe, U.S. policymakers should give up any ambitions of expanding NATO farther into formerly Soviet spaces. Rather than courting countries that NATO is unwilling to defend militarily—note the limp responses to Russian attacks on Georgia and Ukraine—the alliance should strengthen its own internal cohesion and reassure vulnerable members of its commitment to collective defense. Halting NATO expansion eastward would remove a central reason for Russia's encroachments on former Soviet states. But the United States should still cooperate on security matters with those states, a kind of relationship that Russia tolerates.

So far, the United States has insisted that the possibility of NATO membership remains open to Ukraine. Washington has categorically rejected Russia's incorporation of Crimea and insisted that the conflict in the Donbas be brought to an end on the basis of the agreement signed in Minsk in 2015, which stipulates a special autonomous status for separatist regions inside a reunited Ukraine. This approach has made little headway. The Donbas conflict continues, and Russia is putting down deeper roots in Crimea. Distracted from reform by the struggle with Russia, Ukraine is beset by corruption, political volatility, and economic underperformance.

The recent election in Ukraine of a new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, whose supporters now dominate the parliament, has created



an opening for a comprehensive resolution of the crisis. Two tradeoffs are essential. First, to allay Russian concerns, the United States should tell Ukraine that NATO membership is off the table, while deepening bilateral security cooperation with Kiev. Second, Kiev should recognize Russia's incorporation of Crimea in exchange for Moscow's acceptance of the full reintegration of the Donbas into Ukraine without any special status. In a comprehensive agreement, Ukrainians would also receive compensation for lost property in Crimea and Ukraine would be afforded access to offshore resources and guaranteed passage through the Kerch Strait to ports on the Sea of Azov. The United States and the EU would incrementally ease their sanctions on Russia as these arrangements took effect. At the same time, they would offer Ukraine a substantial assistance package aimed at facilitating reform in the belief that a strong, prosperous Ukraine is both the best deterrent against future Russian aggression and a necessary foundation for more constructive Russian-Ukrainian relations.

Such an approach would be met initially with great skepticism in Kiev, Moscow, and elsewhere in Europe. But Zelensky has staked his presidency on resolving the Donbas conflict, and Putin would welcome the chance to redirect resources and attention to countering spreading socioeconomic unrest in Russia. Meanwhile, European leaders are suffering from Ukraine fatigue and want to normalize relations with Russia while still upholding the principles of European security. The time is ripe for bold diplomacy that would allow all sides to claim a partial victory and accommodate the hard realities on the ground: NATO is not prepared to accept Ukraine as a member, Crimea is not going back to Ukraine, and a separatist movement in the Donbas is nonviable without Moscow's active involvement.

A smarter Russia strategy would also better reckon with the implications of the Kremlin's military intervention in the Middle East. It is Iran—not Russia—that poses the main challenge there. When it comes to Iran, Russia has diverging, but not necessarily opposing, interests from those of the United States. Like the United States, Russia does not want Iran to obtain nuclear weapons—that was why it supported the nuclear deal with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan

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*After defeating Napoleon, the Russian emperor Alexander I received the key to the city of Paris.*

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of Action, from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2018. Like the United States, Russia does not want Iran to dominate the Middle East; Moscow seeks to forge a new equilibrium in the region, albeit with a different configuration than the one sought by Washington. The Kremlin has worked to improve relations with other regional powers, such as Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, none of which is especially friendly with Iran. Russia has paid particular attention to Israel, allowing it to strike Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Syria. If the United States deferred to Russia's limited security interests in Syria and accepted Russia as a regional player, it could likely persuade the Kremlin to do more to check aggressive Iranian behavior. The Trump administration is already moving in this direction, but a more vigorous effort is warranted.

Washington must also update its approach to arms control. What worked for the last 50 years no longer will. The world is shifting toward a multipolar order, and China in particular is modernizing its forces. Countries are developing advanced conventional weapons capable of

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*When it comes to Iran, Russia has diverging, but not opposing, interests from those of the United States.*

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destroying hardened targets once vulnerable only to nuclear weapons and cyberweapons that could put at risk nuclear command-and-control systems. As a result, the arms control regime is breaking down. The Bush administration withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, which the president described as an obsolete relic of the Cold War, and in 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which it had derided as ineffective and out of date.

Nevertheless, the United States should prolong New START—the strategic arms reduction treaty signed in 2010 that is set to expire in 2021—a move that Russia supports despite the Trump administration's hesitation. The treaty fosters transparency and trust between the two countries—essential qualities in a time of strained relations—but it does not restrain the accelerating arms race in increasingly sophisticated and powerful weapons. The most promising systems—hypersonic weapons and cyberweapons, for example—fall outside the New START treaty's purview. Policymakers need to develop a new arms control regime that encompasses novel, rapidly developing technologies and includes other major powers. Although



it is necessary to bring China into the process at some point, the United States and Russia should take the lead, as they have before—they possess unique experience in considering the theoretical and practical requirements of strategic stability and corresponding arms control measures. Together, Washington and Moscow should develop a new arms control regime and then bolster it with multilateral support.

On strategic nuclear issues and other matters, the United States cannot prevent the rise of China, but it can channel growing Chinese power in ways that are consistent with U.S. interests. It should make Russia part of this effort rather than drive Russia into China's embrace, as the United States is now doing. It is impossible, of course, to turn Russia against China; Russia has every reason to pursue good relations with a neighbor that has already surpassed it as a major power. But the United States could deftly encourage a different balance of power in Northeast Asia that would serve U.S. purposes.

To do so, U.S. policymakers should help multiply Russia's alternatives to China, thereby improving the Kremlin's bargaining position and reducing the risk that its trade and security agreements with Beijing will be tilted heavily in China's favor, as they are now. As U.S.-Russian relations improve in other areas, the United States should focus on removing those sanctions that prevent Japanese, South Korean, and U.S. investment in Russia's Far East and that block joint ventures with Russian firms in Central Asia. Increasing Russia's options would give the Kremlin greater leverage in dealing with China, to the United States' advantage.

U.S. efforts to moderate competition on regional issues could incline Russia to curb its electoral meddling, but the problem won't go away easily. Some level of interference, from Russia and from other states, is unavoidable in today's interconnected world. Because European democracies face similar challenges, the United States should work with its allies to develop joint and reinforcing responses to these cyberthreats. There should be some redlines regarding Russian behavior; for instance, U.S. officials should take a strong stance against hacking that aims to weaponize stolen information or corrupt data, including voter rolls and vote counts. With better-coordinated exchanges of intelligence, the sharing of best practices, and occasional joint action, the United States and its allies must harden critical electoral infrastructure, push back against Russia with criminal prosecutions and targeted sanctions, and, when appropriate, launch cyber-counterstrikes.

Russian propaganda outlets, such as the television channel RT, Sputnik radio, and social media accounts, pose a trickier problem. A confident, mature, and sophisticated democratic society should be capable of containing this threat with ease without frantically trying to shut down offending websites and Twitter accounts. Amid hyperpartisan rancor in the United States, however, the media and the political class have exaggerated the threat, blaming Russia for domestic discord and dangerously narrowing the room for critical debate by insinuating that opinions that might align with official Russian preferences are part of a Kremlin-inspired influence campaign. A more constructive approach would be for the United States and other democracies to foster greater awareness of the arts of media manipulation and help raise the critical reading skills of their publics, without dampening the vigorous debate that is the lifeblood of democratic societies. Some Scandinavian countries and Baltic states have devoted considerable effort to these tasks, but the United States has lagged behind.

As the United States hardens its systems and educates its citizens, it should also involve Russia in establishing rules of the road in cyberspace. Even if such rules are not fully observed in practice, they could act as a restraint on the most troubling behavior, much in the way the Geneva Conventions have constrained armed conflict.

On all these issues, the proposed mix of accommodation and resistance takes into account the hard realities of Russian interests and American power. This approach stands in sharp contrast to the ones U.S. administrations have pursued since the end of the Cold War, which misread Russia and refused to recognize U.S. limitations. In many ways, this strategy would represent a return to the tradition of U.S. foreign policy before the end of the Cold War.

That grand tradition was forward-looking, pursuing foreign policy with patience over time and satisfied in the short term with incremental gains. The United States did not fear making accommodations with Moscow because it was confident in its values and its future, aware of its great power but mindful of its limitations and respectful of its rival's power. This subtle understanding marked the strategies that all U.S. Cold War-era presidents pursued to master the challenge from Moscow. By recapturing the virtues of its past, the United States can master that challenge again today. 🌐



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