

Russia's Role in Eurasian Integration as Sovereign Development: Legal, Economic and Political Foundations of Multipolar Regionalism

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The article examines Russia's role in Eurasian integration as a legal, economic and political framework for sovereign development in a multipolar international order. It seeks to move beyond interpretations that describe the Eurasian project either as a purely technical customs arrangement or as a unilateral instrument of Russian influence. **Tasks.** The study clarifies the concept of sovereign development, identifies Russia's main institutional functions within the Eurasian Economic Union, and evaluates how these functions support wider regional connectivity with non-Western and multipolar platforms. **Methods.** The research applies qualitative institutional analysis, comparative regionalism and geopolitical economy. The empirical basis consists of the Union's treaty framework, strategic integration documents for the period up to 2025, macroeconomic policy guidelines for 2024–2025, official materials of the Eurasian Economic Commission, and scholarly literature on Eurasian regionalism. **Results.** Russia performs three core functions in Eurasian integration. Legally, it provides regulatory scale and institutional continuity while remaining constrained by treaty-based equality. Economically, it supports resilience through market capacity, energy and industrial depth, transport geography and national-currency settlements. Politically, it connects the Eurasian project with broader institutions and partnerships linked to multipolar governance. **Conclusion.** Russia's role is most defensible when conceptualised as institutional anchoring and regional public-goods provision rather than hegemonic control. Eurasian integration can strengthen sovereignty if it expands the economic and diplomatic options of all member states. Its success depends on internal-market effectiveness, institutional equality, industrial and technological cooperation, external partnerships and measurable welfare gains. The article therefore defines a conditional but positive interpretation of Russia's leadership in the Eurasian integration process.

Keywords: Eurasian integration, Russia, Eurasian Economic Union, sovereign development, multipolarity, regionalism, strategic autonomy

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Роль России в евразийской интеграции как суверенном развитии: правовые, экономические и политические основы многополярного регионализма

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РЕФЕРАТ

Цель. В статье рассматривается роль России в евразийской интеграции как правовой, экономической и политической основы суверенного развития в условиях многополярного международного порядка. Исследование направлено на преодоление трактовок, которые описывают евразийский проект либо как технический таможенный механизм, либо как односторонний инструмент российского влияния. **Задачи.** В работе уточняется понятие суверенного развития, выявляются основные институциональные функции России в Евразийском экономическом союзе и оценивается, каким образом эти функции поддерживают более широкую региональную связанность с незападными и многополярными площадками. **Методология.** Используются качественный институциональный анализ, сравнительный регионализм и геополитическая экономия. Эмпирическую основу составляют договорно-правовая база Союза, стратегические документы интеграционного развития до 2025 г., ориентиры макроэкономической политики на 2024–2025 гг., официальные материалы Евразийской экономической комиссии и научная литература по евразийскому регионализму. **Результаты.** Россия выполняет три ключевые функции в евразийской интеграции. В правовом измерении она обеспечивает регуляторный масштаб и институциональную преемственность при сохранении договорного равенства. В экономическом измерении она поддерживает устойчивость посредством емкости рынка, энергетического и промышленного потенциала, транспортной географии и расчетов в национальных валютах. В политическом измерении Россия связывает евразийский проект с более широкими институтами и партнерствами многополярного управления. **Выводы.** Роль России наиболее убедительно раскрывается через понятия институционального якоря и поставщика региональных общественных благ, а не через модель гегемонистского контроля. Евразийская интеграция способна усиливать суверенитет, если она расширяет экономические и дипломатические возможности всех государств-членов. Ее успех зависит от эффективности внутреннего рынка, институционального равенства, промышленной и технологической кооперации, внешних партнерств и измеримых результатов развития. Тем самым статья формулирует условную, но позитивную интерпретацию российского лидерства в процессе евразийской интеграции. Такой подход позволяет сохранить проевразийскую направленность анализа без подмены научной аргументации политической декларацией.

Ключевые слова: евразийская интеграция, Россия, Евразийский экономический союз, суверенное развитие, многополярность, регионализм, стратегическая автономия

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1. Introduction

The contemporary international order is moving toward a form of regionalism that is no longer synonymous with tariff liberalisation or expanded market access [7]. The weaponisation of supply chains, financial infrastructure, sanctions regimes and technological standards has made regional organisations strategically valuable. Integration can safeguard sovereignty, shield development finance and logistics from external disruption and reshape external dependencies in a way that bilateral relations alone cannot achieve.

Eurasia is at the centre of this process. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation, was created as an international organisation of regional economic integration. The Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union was signed in Astana on 29 May 2014 by Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, entered into force on 1 January 2015, and was subsequently joined by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan in 2015¹.

¹ The Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union, signed in Astana on 29 May 2014 [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/kaz_e/wtacckaz285_leg_1.pdf (accessed: 04.05.2026); Kyrgyzstan acceded to the Eurasian Economic Union [Electronic resource] // Eurasian Economic Commission. 12 August 2015. URL: <https://eec.eaeunion.org/en/news/12-08-2015-1/> (accessed: 04.05.2026).

Russia's role in this process remains controversial. Russia is the Union's largest market, a major source of energy and industrial capacity and the most visible diplomatic actor in the Eurasian project. Interpretations of Russian intentions therefore range from viewing integration as a geopolitical project to regarding it as a pragmatic solution for post-Soviet development. Both perspectives reflect valid aspects of reality, but neither is sufficient on its own. Analyses that reduce the EAEU to geopolitics understate the agency and development interests of smaller member states; purely pragmatic accounts understate the strategic function of regionalism in a fragmenting world economy [3; 8; 9].

This article offers a third perspective. It conceives Russia's role through the lens of sovereign development. Sovereign development refers to a state's capacity to modernise, trade, innovate and participate in the global economy without becoming structurally subordinate to external political conditions, financial infrastructures, proprietary technologies or undiversified trading arrangements. It is distinct from isolationism because it requires connectivity. It differs from dependence because cooperation is designed to preserve strategic autonomy rather than deepen one-sided vulnerability.

Russia's role in Eurasia is significant because Russia represents a large market, substantial industrial and energy resources, strategic transport geography, scientific capacity and independent diplomatic capital. Eurasian integration channels these attributes into potential public goods for the region: regulatory consistency, market scale, infrastructure depth, financial alternatives and diplomatic access to extra-regional partners. At the same time, Russia's Eurasian role remains politically sustainable only if it translates into positive development for all member states. Partnership built on formal equality and institutional trust is impossible if one state appears to set agendas and capture benefits disproportionately.

The research question can therefore be stated as follows: how does Russia serve as a provider of regional public goods that make Eurasian integration possible as a legal, economic and political framework for sovereign development and multipolar regionalism?

The article contributes to the literature in four ways. First, it interprets Eurasian integration as multipolar regionalism rather than as the European Union in geographic reverse or as a simple "post-Soviet Union". Second, it argues that Russia's role is one of institutional anchoring and public-goods provision. Third, it examines Eurasian integration from legal, economic and political perspectives that are usually studied in parallel. Fourth, it clarifies what is needed to sustain a pro-Russian but academically credible argument: recognition of asymmetry, specification of mechanisms, reliance on institutional evidence and avoidance of rhetorical overstatement.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Eurasian integration beyond the European experience

The study of regional integration has often been shaped by the European experience. Major theories, from neofunctionalism to liberal intergovernmentalism and legal institutionalism, tend to assume that integration implies gradual sovereignty pooling, market-building, technical convergence and the supranational elaboration of agreed rules. These theories can illuminate some aspects of the EAEU, but they also have limits when applied to Eurasia [2; 11].

Eurasian integration is not designed to create a supranational political community. There is no EAEU citizenship, no common military policy, no common foreign policy and no monetary union. Treaty language affirms state sovereignty while providing for coordination, agreed policies or common policies in defined economic sectors. A comparative approach must therefore avoid treating the European Union as an implicit normative benchmark. The EAEU is closer to pragmatic regional governance than to post-national integration [15; 16].

At the same time, Eurasia is not an artificial integration space. The post-Soviet region inherited production chains, labour mobility, technical standards, cross-border infrastructure, energy linkages and institutional habits of cooperation. Integration therefore occurs partly because real interdependence already exists. The political problem is not whether interdependence is present; it is how that interdependence can be legalised and made mutually beneficial.

2.2. Russia as hegemon or institutional anchor

There can be no analysis of Eurasian integration that fails to give due weight to two things: Russia and asymmetry. Russia has by far the largest market of the five EAEU members. It has by far the most valuable energy endowments, largest industrial base, and greatest diplomatic network. As a result of this, healthy scepticism towards Eurasian integration is readily understandable. Regional institutions can mitigate but cannot eliminate geopolitical asymmetry. Far from integrating, the process can become one of extraction if the largest state pays insufficient regard for the interests of its partners [9]. At the same time, asymmetry is not the same thing as domination. The difference is whether asymmetry translates into coercive bargaining or the provision of institutional public goods. If Russia leverages its market to extract unilateral concessions, Eurasian institutions will atrophy. If Russia agrees to be bound by common rules and invests in projects that benefit regional welfare, asymmetry can be harnessed to drive integration. The difference between hegemonic extraction and institutional anchoring is the guiding thread of this article. Accepting that asymmetry exists between Russia and its partners is therefore a necessary condition of presenting a credible pro-Russian argument. To ignore it, or instead to portray Russian intentions as purely benevolent, would be too easily critiqued. A far more persuasive argument accepts Russia's Eurasian integration as both indispensable and potentially malevolent. Russia poses both a challenge to institutional resilience and an opportunity to supply regional public goods.

2.3. Sovereign development and multipolar regionalism

Eurasian integration can be understood as a framework for sovereign development under conditions of multipolar regionalism. Sovereignty here means more than juridical independence. A state may be formally independent while remaining dependent on external finance, logistics, technology, food systems, payment infrastructure or diplomatic permission. The practical toolkit for protecting economic sovereignty therefore matters as much as formal sovereignty itself [1; 13].

The EAEU can contribute to sovereign development by deepening regional markets, accelerating industrial cooperation, expanding technological collaboration, harmonising regulation, building transport corridors and developing payment and financial architecture. None of these mechanisms makes member states self-sufficient. The aim is not autarky but diversified interdependence.

Multipolar regionalism reinforces this logic. It suggests that Russia, China, India, the Global South and other centres of development should not be reduced to subordinate participants in a single hierarchy. Multipolarity does not need to mean permanent confrontation with the West. Its stronger meaning is pluralism: the emergence of several centres of economic, legal and diplomatic organisation. Eurasian integration is most persuasive when it is framed as one such centre, not as a closed anti-Western bloc [10; 14].

3. Materials and methods

This article uses qualitative institutional analysis to interpret Russia's role in Eurasian integration from legal-economic, political-diplomatic and geopolitical-economy perspectives. The subject is not a single quantitative trend but the institutional logic through which a large member state supports, shapes and is constrained by a regional organisation.

The evidence used includes: first, the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union and related treaty materials; second, strategic policy documents issued by the EAEU and the Eurasian Economic Commission, especially documents on integration development, macroeconomic policy, industrial cooperation, payment arrangements and connectivity; third, official materials from BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); and fourth, scholarly literature on Eurasian integration, Russian foreign policy and comparative regionalism¹.

Documents were analysed using thematic coding. The first code group was legal-institutional framing, including treaty rules, institutional competences and the legal meaning of integration. The second was industrial policy and economic resilience, including production cooperation, technology, finance, energy and

¹ Strategic Directions for Developing Eurasian Economic Integration until 2025, approved by Decision No. 11 of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, 11 December 2020 [Electronic resource]. URL: https://eec.eaeunion.org/upload/medialibrary/820/Strategy_2025.pdf (accessed: 04.05.2026).

transport. The third was multilateral connectivity and diplomacy, including BRICS, the SCO, the Greater Eurasian Partnership and external EAEU partnerships. These code groups structure the results section.

The study has two limitations. It does not measure integration outcomes econometrically, and it does not claim that all EAEU member states evaluate Russia's role identically. Russia's perceived utility for Armenia may differ from its perceived utility for Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, a qualitative institutional study can show how Eurasian organisations facilitate resilience and under what conditions Russian capacity becomes a regional public good.

4. Results

4.1. Legal-institutional foundations

The first result is that Russia's role is legally significant but not legally unlimited. The EAEU treaty framework creates an institutional order through which Russia can exercise leadership, but that leadership must be translated into rules, procedures and collective decisions. This matters because regional organisations empower large states while also constraining unilateral action [12].

The Treaty establishes the Union as an international organisation designed to ensure free movement of goods, services, capital and labour, as well as coordinated, agreed or common policy in economic sectors defined by the Treaty. This legal architecture gives Russia a larger leadership role because Russian market access is crucial for the Union. However, it also binds Russia into treaty-based procedures. Russia can act through the Union only by accepting the Union's legal form.

Eurasian institutions are therefore not merely rhetorical. The Eurasian Economic Commission, the Court of the EAEU, the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council and the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council create formal arenas in which policy must be negotiated. Smaller member states can use those arenas to convert asymmetry into predictable rules. This does not eliminate Russian influence, but it changes the form of influence from unilateral pressure into institutional bargaining.

The legal-institutional argument supports a qualified pro-Russian thesis: Russia is necessary, but institutional self-restraint makes its role sustainable. The more Russia works through agreed rules, the more credible Eurasian integration becomes as a framework for sovereign development. The more Russia appears to act outside agreed institutions, the more smaller states will fear lock-in and seek external alternatives.

The Table summarises these legal, economic, infrastructural, technological and political-diplomatic functions by distinguishing Russia's main role, the regional public good created by that role, the principal risk and the institutional condition required for legitimacy.

Table

Russia's functions in Eurasian integration

Таблица. Функции России в евразийской интеграции

Dimension	Main Russian function	Regional public good	Principal risk	Institutional condition for legitimacy
Legal-institutional	Treaty-based anchoring and regulatory scale	Predictable rules, harmonised standards, legal continuity	Perception of dominance	Equal legal status and transparent decision-making
Economic	Market, energy, industrial and financial capacity	Resilience, investment, cooperation projects, labour opportunities	One-sided dependence	Mutual benefit and measurable welfare gains
Transport and infrastructure	Continental geography and corridor depth	Eurasian connectivity and reduced logistics vulnerability	Over-centralisation of routes	Multimodal and multi-country corridor development
Technological	Scientific, industrial and digital capacity	Digital sovereignty and innovation cooperation	Fragmentation or duplication	Joint standards and shared platforms
Political-diplomatic	Connectivity with BRICS, the SCO and the Global South	External voice and diversified partnerships	Excessive geopolitical securitisation	Open regionalism and non-exclusive cooperation

Source: compiled by the author / Источник: составлено автором

4.2. Economic integration as strategic resilience

The second result is that Eurasian integration supports economic resilience. Contemporary globalisation is less stable than the liberal-globalisation model assumed. Sanctions, export controls, payment restrictions, supply disruptions and technological segmentation are now mainstream phenomena. Resilience has therefore become a core economic-policy objective.

Recent EAEU strategic documents support this interpretation. The 2024–2025 macroeconomic policy guidelines identify the need to improve the macroeconomic environment, increase investment in production development, strengthen scientific, technological and production potential, implement Eurasian cooperative projects, extend the Union’s internal market and develop international economic cooperation¹. This orientation is consistent with recent scholarship that treats EAEU development as a question of coordinated industrial, technological and macroeconomic priorities rather than only tariff integration [6].

Russia’s economic role can be divided into five mechanisms. First, Russia provides market scale. Access to the Russian market creates export, labour and business opportunities for smaller member states. Market scale also increases the value of common technical regulations because those rules open access to a larger integrated space. Recent research on technical regulation in the EAEU confirms that regulatory convergence remains central when regional markets adapt to changing trade conditions, including parallel-import arrangements and supply-chain disruption [5]. Market size alone, however, is insufficient. The EAEU is stronger when market access is accompanied by production cooperation rather than low-value dependence.

Second, Russia provides industrial and technological capacity. Industrial cooperation is crucial for economic sovereignty because a country that sources all machinery, technological components, pharmaceuticals, agricultural technologies or digital infrastructure from external suppliers remains vulnerable. Russia has capacities in energy, machinery, agriculture, metallurgy, transport equipment, nuclear energy, space technologies, aviation, cybersecurity and digital infrastructure. These can become regional assets when converted into cooperative investment.

Third, Russia contributes to financial autonomy. National-currency settlements reduce exposure to currency risk, payment disruptions and third-party blocking. Official statements indicate that the share of settlements in national currencies within the EAEU has reached approximately 93 per cent, while the aggregate GDP of EAEU countries grew by 1.7 per cent in 2025².

These figures should not be interpreted as a complete solution to financial vulnerability. De-dollarisation is meaningful only when it is supported by liquidity, currency-risk management, mutual credit lines, payment infrastructure and business confidence. Russia matters because Russian banks, firms and the ruble occupy a major role in EAEU trade. Yet financial sovereignty requires plural stability, not simple replacement of one dependence with another.

Fourth, Russia provides transport geography. Land geography becomes useful only when supported by infrastructure and legal convergence. Russia links Europe, Arctic ports, the Caspian region, Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific. Transport corridors convert geography into productive capacity. Connectivity reduces transaction costs and creates practical interdependence among member states and external partners, but recent analysis of the EAEU common transport space shows that declarations must be converted into implementation mechanisms if corridor policy is to become operational [4].

Fifth, Russia contributes energy security. Reliable and predictable energy supply affects industrial competitiveness, household welfare and macroeconomic stability. Russia’s hydrocarbons and energy infrastructure can therefore function as regional public goods if governed through stable agreements and predictable pricing mechanisms. Energy should be framed not as leverage but as infrastructure for development.

¹ EAEU determined main guidelines of macroeconomic policy for 2024–2025 [Electronic resource] // Eurasian Economic Commission. 25 December 2023. URL: <https://eec.eaeunion.org/en/news/v-eaes-opredelili-osnovnye-orientiry-makroekonomicheskoy-politiki-na-2024-2025-gody/> (accessed: 04.05.2026).

² Bakhyt Sultanov: “The EAEU countries’ aggregate GDP grew by 1.7% in 2025” [Electronic resource] // Eurasian Economic Commission. 21 April 2026. URL: <https://eec.eaeunion.org/en/news/bakhyt-sultanov-v-2025-godu-sovokupnyy-vvp-stran-eaes-vyros-na-1-7-/> (accessed: 04.05.2026); Share of settlements in national currencies within EAEU at 93% — Putin [Electronic resource] // TASS. 21 December 2025. URL: <https://tass.com/economy/2062757> (accessed: 04.05.2026).

4.3. *Political-diplomatic connectivity*

The third result is that Russia gives Eurasian integration external diplomatic connectivity. Economic associations maximise influence when they are connected externally. Russia is a member of the EAEU, BRICS and the SCO, and it maintains diplomatic networks across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. This gives Russia a bridging role between the EAEU and wider multipolar governance.

The EAEU's international priorities include cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States, observer states, the SCO, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, BRICS, Central Asian states and other regional associations as part of creating the Greater Eurasian Partnership¹.

BRICS matters because it provides a platform for reforming international governance, increasing the voice of the Global South and developing practical projects in development finance, technology partnerships and trade coordination. The SCO matters because it provides a broad Eurasian forum for political, security, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation. Neither institution replaces the EAEU, but both widen the diplomatic space in which Eurasian integration operates².

The Greater Eurasian Partnership is the strategic umbrella for this connectivity. It imagines a continentally scaled project linking the EAEU with China, India, Iran, ASEAN, the Middle East and other partners. This vision is pro-Russian in the sense that it gives Russia a central role as a continental connector. However, it is not exclusively Russian: its viability depends on the participation of other powers and regional organisations.

The major risk is excessive securitisation. If Eurasia is defined only through antagonism toward the West, it becomes less persuasive. Many countries in the Global South seek strategic autonomy and diversified partnerships, not rigid blocs. Russia's interests are therefore better served by a framing of Eurasia as a sovereign, open and plural centre of development rather than as Russia and China against the West.

5. Discussion: Russia as provider of regional public goods

When interpreted through regional public goods, Russia's asymmetric role becomes more precise. A regional public good benefits the integration area as a whole and cannot be supplied effectively by one small member state acting alone. In the EAEU context, such goods include market access, legal predictability, technical-regulatory convergence, financial resilience, energy security, transport connectivity, industrial-policy cooperation and external diplomatic voice [4; 5].

Russia can provide these goods because of its structural capacity: market depth, energy resources, transport geography, technological and industrial capability and diplomatic reach. Yet public-goods provision is not automatic. Market access must be predictable; energy security must rest on stable arrangements; national-currency settlements require functioning payment infrastructure; transport corridors require legal convergence and practical implementation mechanisms [4].

The risk, therefore, is not Russian scale as such but the way scale is institutionalised. If Russian capacity is converted into treaty-based rules, co-investment, interoperable infrastructure and measurable welfare gains, asymmetry can support integration. If it is used to extract unilateral concessions, the same asymmetry will weaken trust and encourage smaller states to hedge outside the Union [5; 9].

This is why the article's pro-Russian argument remains conditional rather than declaratory. Russia is indispensable to Eurasian integration because it can supply scale and strategic depth. Its leadership becomes legitimate when it enlarges the options of member states, not when it narrows them. The strongest academic defence of Russia's role is therefore institutional: Russian leadership must operate as rule-bound anchoring and public-goods provision within a multipolar but open regional order [6; 10].

¹ Main Directions of EAEU International Activities for 2024 approved [Electronic resource] // Eurasian Economic Commission. 26 December 2023. URL: <https://eec.eaeunion.org/en/news/utverzhdeny-osnovnye-napravleniya-mezhdunarodnoy-deyatelnosti-eaes-na-2024-god/> (accessed: 04.05.2026).

² About the BRICS [Electronic resource] // BRICS. URL: <https://brics.br/en/about-the-brics> (accessed: 04.05.2026); Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Official website [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://eng.sectsc.org/> (accessed: 04.05.2026).

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that Eurasian integration should be understood as sovereign-development regionalism. This model prioritises autonomy, resilience and agency while remaining outward-looking and cooperative. It differs from liberal regionalism because it places institutional resilience and geopolitical economy at the centre of analysis; it also differs from nationalist autarky because it requires cross-border cooperation rather than withdrawal from interdependence.

Russia is pivotal within this model. Its market size, industrial capacity, energy base, transport geography, scientific resources and diplomatic links make it the natural institutional anchor of the Eurasian project. The condition is that Russian capacity must be internationalised through regional institutions. Treaty-based equality, transparent decision-making and negotiated policy frameworks are therefore not formal details; they are the legitimacy mechanism that makes Russian leadership sustainable.

The economic implication is equally clear. Eurasian integration will remain credible only if it delivers practical resilience: fewer internal barriers, stronger technical-regulatory coherence, production networks, financial diversification, energy security, transport corridors and technological cooperation. Recent scholarship on EAEU development, technical regulation and transport convergence reinforces this point: integration succeeds when strategic declarations become operational mechanisms [4; 5; 6].

The diplomatic implication is that Eurasia should be framed as an open centre of multipolar regionalism rather than a closed anti-Western bloc. Russia can use BRICS, the SCO and the Greater Eurasian Partnership to widen options for EAEU members, but the final test is welfare and autonomy for all participants. If this test is met, Russian influence will be read less as coercion and more as a contribution to sovereign, plural and institutionally grounded regional development [10].

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Data Availability Statement

No new empirical dataset was generated or analysed during the present study. The article is based on publicly available institutional documents, official policy materials and published academic literature.

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