Armenia’s 2018 Revolution, Motivations and New Media

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, the social movement against Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan in Armenia shocked analysts, a substantial of whom believe that this series of movements can be thought of as a revolution, a revolution as the complete end of the Soviet elements in Armenia. According to Goldstone’s revolution doctrine, the causes of this revolution and further understanding the process of the revolution could be more distinct. Furthermore, remember what Goldstone agrees - do not use theory to rigidly set historical facts, but use historical facts to construct theories (Stinchcombe, 1978), based on the facts of the Armenian revolution, some theoretical explanations may need to be discarded, or new researchers will also develop new theories during the issues of explaining the Armenian revolution.

Keywords: Election, New Media, Motivations, Protest, Revolution.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is no doubt that the Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018 was a success, in the sense that it meant the complete end of the “Soviet-style” political model in Armenia, as such a meaningful iconic action, this article is based on Goldstone and Skocpol’s revolutionary doctrines to discuss dynamics it happened, or named as motivations, and the synergy between the individual parts - how they contributed to the success of this revolution. The author also proposes a novel factor that has rarely been noticed in previous revolutionary movements, unlike motivational newspapers and television, it is new media based on the Internet, represented by social media such as Facebook. The paper also attempts to appropriately discuss the role of new media in contributing to the success of the revolution.

II. PROCESS – ELECTION AND PROTEST

2018 is the year of general elections in Armenia, while the prime minister’s election has set off a “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia, triggering large-scale public protests and social unrest, and ultimately leading to the change of government and parliament. Revolutionary leader Nikol Pashinyan ascended to the center of the Armenian political arena. Based on the introduction of the Armenian “Velvet Revolution”, this article attempts to explore the underlying reasons for its occurrence.

From the outbreak of the “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia to the end of 2018, Armenia has experienced multiple prime minister elections and one parliamentary election, which has changed the political situation in Armenia to a large degree, the development process of this regime change in Armenia is roughly divided into four procedure:

A. The First Procedure (from April 13th to May 8th, 2018)

The revolution broke out, the former prime minister was forced to step down, and opposition leader Pashinyan was appointed as the new prime minister. Beginning on April 13th, 2018, a large-scale anti-government protest broke out in Armenia. About tens of thousands of citizens participated in the opposition to former President Serzh Sargsyan’s candidacy for prime minister - the main reproach made to Sargsyan was to not have reduced corruption - "endemic" - and poverty - "growing" - in the state. However, the parliament neglected the protests and elected Sargsyan as prime minister of the new government on the 17th. On the same day, the protest leader Pashinyan announced the start of the "Velvet Revolution". The election of Sargsyan ignited public outrage, and public protests continued to rise. On the 22nd alone, 227 protesters were arrested. On April 23rd, the new Prime Minister Sargsyan, who was elected less than a week ago, was forced to resign. On May 1st, the Armenian Parliament held a special meeting for the election of the prime minister. Since the then ruling party, the Republican Party of Armenia, had a majority in the
parliament, the opposition leader Pashinyan received only 45 votes and lost the election - the demonstrators blocked roads, highways and airports. On the 2nd, the Republican representative compromised, saying that he would not recommend the Republican prime minister candidate and support the candidate nominated by one-third of the congressmen. On the 8th, the Armenian Parliament carried out the election again, in the election of the prime minister, the opposition leader Pashinyan, as the only candidate, won the election with 59 votes in favor and 42 votes against, and more than half of the parliamentarians supported the election.

B. In The Second Procedure (from May 8th to October 16th, 2018)

The new Prime Minister Pashinyan was in power at the beginning, and the government had mass conflicts with the Republican Party. Although Pashinyan became the new prime minister, the Republican Party accounted for 50 of the 105 seats in the parliament at that time, which made Pashinyan’s policy repeatedly blocked. In order to crack down on the Republican Party, the new government first directed its spearhead at the mayor of Yerevan (Republican Party). According to the investigation, the Yerevan Foundation has illegal activities such as corruption and misuse of funds. On July 9th, 2018, the mayor of Yerevan and one of the founders of the Republican Party, Taron Margaryan, announced his resignation. On September 23rd, the Yerevan City Council held an election - the “My Pace Political Party Alliance” led by Pashinyan took the top spot with a support rate of 81.06%. The Mayor of Yerevan was also replaced as a supporter of Pashinyan. After losing the important position of the mayor of the capital, the Republican parliament fought back. Not only did it fail to pass the new draft election law proposed by the government, but it also passed a bill to amend the parliamentary procedures on October 2nd, in an attempt to delay and prevent the dissolution of the parliament to the greatest extent possible. Pashinyan organized a mass rally again on the same day to oppose the passage of the bill and announced his resignation from high-ranking officials of other parties who supported the bill.

C. In The Third Procedure (October 16th to December 9th, 2018)

Pashinyan announced his resignation and successfully resigned to promote the dissolution of the original parliament. As the conflict between the government and the parliament is difficult to resolve, Pashinyan realized that the already high public opinion must be quickly “realized”, so he gave a televised speech on October 16th, 2018, announcing his resignation and calling for a new parliamentary election to be held in advance. According to the constitution, after the prime minister resigns, if the parliament fails to elect a new prime minister in two rounds of prime minister elections, the parliament will automatically be dissolved. On October 24th, Armenia held the first round of prime minister elections, with Pashinyan as the only candidate. Because his supporters in the parliament responded to his call for early parliamentary elections, most of them only abstained, but the Republican Party and other parliamentary groups, the largest party in parliament, either protested or because they understood that the election was just a form of early parliamentary elections. Most of them did not participate in the voting, so in fact, there were only 12 valid votes in this election. In the end, the first round of the prime minister’s election ended with 11 abstentions, 1 objection, and no affirmative votes. On November 1, the Armenian parliament held the second round of elections for the prime minister. Pashinyan was still the only candidate. The election failed again with 13 abstentions, no affirmative votes, and no negative votes. As the two rounds of elections failed to elect a new prime minister, the parliament was dissolved, while the original parliament continued to work until the new parliament was formed. Pashinyan temporarily served as acting prime minister.

D. In The Fourth Procedure (December 9th, 2018 to the Present)

The political party led by Pashinyan won the election of the new parliament, and the Armenian regime temporarily entered a relatively stable stage. On December 9th, 2018, Armenia held early parliamentary elections as scheduled. “My Pace Alliance” received a total of 70.42% of the votes, the Prosperity Armenia Party received 8.26% of the votes, the Bright Armenia Party received 6.35% of the votes, and the former ruling party, the Republican Party, returned because it failed to pass the 5% parliamentary threshold. Therefore, proportionally, “My Pace Alliance” won 84 seats, the Prosperity Armenian Party 10 seats, the Bright Armenian Party 7 seats, and another 4 seats.

The seats for ethnic minorities were also won by My Pace Alliance. However, because the Armenian Electoral Law stipulates that the opposition must occupy at least one-third of the parliament, the Prosperity Armenian Party and the Bright Armenian Party have increased their members in proportion to 26 and 18 seats, respectively. As a result, the new council has increased from 105 to 132 seats. On January 14th, 2019, the new parliament held its first meeting, and Pashinyan became prime minister again. The birth of the new parliament enabled Pashinyan to obtain the support of both the government and parliament, and finally, anyway, Armenia’s political agenda began to get on track.
III. STATE BREAKDOWN? WHAT SURPRISED GOLDSTONE

According to Goldstone (1993);

(...)State breakdown thus refers to a condition of grave disorder, with a collapse of state authority. Such a situation is sometimes called a revolution. However, I shall reserve the term "revolution" for those cases where state breakdown is followed by substantial changes in political and social institutions and in the ideology used to justify those institutions(...) (p.11).

Thus, state breakdown is often regarded as a prerequisite for revolution, or at least it should be an indispensable part of "revolution".

What may surprise Goldstone, however, is that the revolution in Armenia in 2018 did not seem to be accompanied by state breakdown - Except for extremely small-scale conflicts, everything was carried out peacefully (at least compared with the Armenian revolution in 2008). To clarify this approach clearly, let’s look at the description of the first persons who led the protest actions.

Arpi Davoyan said:

Any modern revolution, especially a peaceful one, is always a social technology. The Armenian Revolution manifested a completely new, but effective technology. People achieved the overthrow of the government simply by blocking roads, while the blocking itself was carried out very gracefully. So elegant, so technologically advanced, that the authorities simply could not do anything. No thugs could do anything, they were useless. At the same time, this technology is formulated in just a few words and very simply: “If the police arrived, then you need to run away if they left, then you need to come running” (Videoblog by Romanov, 2018)

Kristina Poghosyan said:

“They came – we left, they left – we came, they blocked the square where we gathered, where we had tents, they removed everything. We said: "There are many squares in Yerevan, so we will go to another square". So they did not have time to run into the bus and then follow us, they just ran after us and could not do anything, because we did not go to the collision. We just didn't go for a collision. They went there, we came here, in this chaos, disorder, they just couldn't do anything” (Videoblog by Romanov, 2018)

One ingenious invention of the Armenian revolutionaries is the so-called "endless snake". This is when people on a pedestrian crossing start walking back and forth, back and forth, from curb to curb, thereby blocking the movement of cars. Not for long, just for 1-3 minutes. But that's enough. There is first a traffic jam, then a traffic jam, then the traffic stops. Sometimes for a long time, it freezes just tightly. While it is important to observe the condition that motorists support pedestrians. And this is another lesson of the Armenian revolution. A small group of stubborn activists can start a revolution, but the revolution begins to win only when it begins to support the overwhelming majority. Well, at least the vast majority of residents of the capital. Although in Armenia, the revolution was actually supported by the whole country.

“Civil disobedience, when everyone is actually involved. That was the key to victory. To be honest, when we started doing this, we did not expect that this would happen. While it turned out, we are very happy” (The author was not specified). “People joke that there are only small children left at home who can't go out now, and elderly people who can't leave the house either. I think that after all the people have gone out to stand up for their rights, there can be no danger after that. Because people felt free, felt that everyone can change something on their own” (Lucy Dayan, in Videoblog by Romanov, 2018).

Kristina Poghosyan: “There was just a click and everything, and everyone stood up, everyone wanted it. It wasn't planned. We hoped, while we didn't know if it would work or not. But we all hoped it would be so”. (Videoblog by Romanov, 2018)

“We were joking, laughing, only positive! They beat us, we joked jokes. We talked to them, made contact, and hugged police officers who didn't want to hug us. I followed them around, asked them all to hug me, and they asked me to leave them alone. I told you I wouldn't leave you alone until you told me you were our friends. That's how we won, mixed, and embrace everyone! With love, with kindness, with a smile, we won”.

Another fundamental point is that from the very beginning of the Armenian Velvet Revolution, its leaders have relied on nonviolence. Such an exaggerated, hypertrophied excessive peacefulness, even, if I may say so, aggressive friendliness. In principle, very friendly and friendly people already live in Armenia, yet here this national trait has been turned into another very effective tool of the revolution.

Therefore, even from the most superficial level, even if do not explore the fundamental causes of the success of the "nonviolent revolution", one thing is certain, that is: even if there is no accompanying state breakdown, the revolution can be successful - according to Goldstone, a very important function of state breakdown is to break the old state apparatus, but it is clear that nonviolent revolution can achieve the same effect. This can be confirmed by quoting an analyst, for Guevorg Melikyan, a political scientist, “What we see today is the end of the fall of the Soviet Union in Armenia. This fall lasted a long time, so much the heritage of this Soviet Union still held the people in the "grip". What we see today is a new generation that
has taken its responsibilities and won over this Soviet Armenia” - state breakdown is not a necessity of revolution. Moreover, Skocpol’s view that revolutions must involve (foreign) military forces (Skocpol, 1979) seems to be invalidated here too as well as Goldstone.

IV. CORE ISSUES OF WHY THE REVOLUTION HAPPENED AND SUCCEED

Within the framework of Goldstone, there are many factors affecting the revolution. Specifically, in the Armenian Revolution in 2018, there are three factors played a major role - the elites, the citizens, and ideology.

A. Elites-The Tension between Elite Interests and State Interests

As far as Goldstone’s explanation of the motives of the state crisis, “Because of the diversity of elite interests(...) Elites therefore generally supported state actions that appeared consistent with the performance of expected state tasks, while opposed state actions that threatened an excessive concentration of power in rulers at the expense of broader elite interests...This continuous tension over state resource control was usually managed by negotiation between the state and elites. State crises occurred when these latent conflicts escalated into overt struggles.” (Goldstone, 1993). To a certain extent, the Armenian revolution in 2018 was the result of uncontrollable tension.

Sargsyan's breach of his promise to run for prime minister became the direct fuse. Sargsyan was elected president in 2008 and was re-elected in 2013. However, both elections triggered mass protests. At the end of 2015, Armenia amended the constitution and changed the national government to a parliamentary system; the prime minister controls the country's executive power and becomes the de facto leader of the country; the president is the head of state and becomes a ceremonial office. Before the bill was officially introduced, there were doubts in Armenian society, believing that Sargsyan's move was intended to pave the way for him to run for prime minister. In order to calm public opinion, Sargsyan publicly stated in a meeting with the members of the Committee of Experts on Constitutional Reform in 2014: “I will not be nominated as President of Armenia again. If the country’s government is changed to a parliamentary system after the constitutional reform, I will not seek the position of Prime Minister. I believe that the same person should not be in power more than two times in a country”.

While he abandoned his original promise and participated in the prime minister's election, which made the people feel deceived and went to the streets to vent their dissatisfaction. Armenian society also generally believes that Sargsyan's re-election means that the traditional political and economic status of Armenian society will not undergo major changes. The Armenian political observer Hayk Khalatyan wrote on the website of the Russian International Affairs Council: “When Sargsyan is elected prime minister, everyone no longer expects any fundamental changes. Nikita Isaev, director of the Russian Institute of Real Economics, said in an interview: “The people of Armenia understand that they have nowhere to go. They either reach their goals or continue to be unprofessional politicians. Under the authority of the country, (unprofessional politicians) can neither stimulate economic development nor gain an advantage in negotiations with neighboring countries.” In addition, the liberalized social environment also makes it difficult for the Armenian people to accept the “lifetime of the state leader power”.

As a member of the elite groups, the tension between Sargsyan's interests (to continue to hold power) and state interests (the country needs better and more professional politicians to make better changes) gradually became unbalanced under the long-term disappointment of society, and finally became the fuse of the revolution.

B. The Internal Competition of the Elite Groups

If the conflict between the interests of the elite and the state interest can be regarded as the fuse of the revolution, then the internal competition of the elite groups may be the more obvious direct cause.

Regardless of whether it is Sargsyan or Pashinyan, whether it is the Republican Party or Pashinyan’s “Alliance”, they are both Armenian political elites and experienced political veterans. Although the revolution was caused by Sargsyan’s excessive pursuit of power, in the final analysis, it was caused by two domestic groups of leaders. It’s the “warfare” of the elites competing focusing on power (although the method was peaceful, it did not cause excessive bloodshed).

The performance of other political parties in the country has also confirmed this point. In several uncertain elections during the revolution, other political parties (Prosperity Armenia Party, Bright Armenia Party) were also making every effort to win seats in the parliament—from the beginning to the end, although street politics played a role, the main players competing for power on the political arena were still the elites and their political parties. It is a pity that we did not see what can the protesters accomplish directly from this victory of the revolution.
C. Mobilization and Citizens

Just as Goldstone analyzed why the revolution in the Philippines failed, on the contrary, in Armenia’s street politics, full citizen participation and mobilization effects can be seen. In order to demonstrate the role of people's mobilization, Goldstone reproduced Skocpol's statement about great revolutions (Goldstone, 1993; Skocpol, 1979). Let’s take a look at the power of social mobilization from the reports at the time:

“More than 250 activists of the protest movement, including Pashinyan himself, were arrested. As a result of this unwise decision, the situation in the country has only worsened. Even military personnel began to join the protesters, in particular, the peacekeeping brigade of the Armenian Defense Ministry went over to their side. The transfer of the army units to the side of the protesters was the last argument for Sargsyan. As a result, Pashinyan and his supporters were released on April 23rd, and Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan resigned on April 24th. The peaceful democratic revolution achieved its main goal: the election of a new prime minister was scheduled for May 1. The Republican Party decided not to nominate its candidate, so the only candidate was Nikol Pashinyan. In the first vote, he did not get the required number of votes in the parliament. The calculation of the Republican Party was that if the prime minister could not be chosen and the re-election would also fail, then an early parliamentary election would be called, in which the Republican Party expected to win. Use a month on the resource and try again to elect your representative as prime minister. However, Nikol Pashinyan also understood this. He called on his supporters to continue the actions until the victorious end, that is, until the removal of the Republican Party itself from power”.

On this basis, Goldstone further pointed out that the causal force that promotes systemic changes in society is the behavioral choice of the people (Stinchcombe, 1978). Here is also the issue of the legitimacy of the revolution, on the issue of legitimacy, Goldstone agrees with Furet's statement that the legitimacy of the revolution is the will of the people (Furet, 1981). Without the use of violence, the key factor for the success of the revolution is its legitimacy, because, within the legal framework, the people’s demands are legal, and Sargsyan’s actions are unconstitutional, so it’s not difficult to understand why the revolution will eventually be successful, and even during the revolution, some police officers have joined the protesting team.

D. Ideology or Preference?

Goldstone believes that when the old system collapsed, ideology has become the dominant factor in the revolution. Obviously, this is the case in Armenia, the protests of the people have played a role, and the parliament has to hold many elections under pressure. But there is still such a doubt, what is the conceptual factor of the supporters' protest voice? Is it ideology or subjective preference? This question needs to be petitioned - because maybe both ideology and subjective preference will lead to the same result, but in essence, the two are fundamentally different, so they should be told apart.

Fortunately, we can be sure that the situation in Armenia is the former and not the latter. In Armenia, the situation is, the Armenian revolution did not divide people into “advanced oppositionists” and “quilted jackets”; although it probably could have. The fact is that there are really a lot of people in Armenia who dislike the West and love Russia very much. There are even more people who love Putin. In Armenian hotels, there are five Russian TV channels per Armenian TV channel. If desired, it would be possible to divide the population into pro-Western and pro-Russian, but no one did this. There is a common pain, there is common fatigue, there is a common goal, and all the inhabitants of the country are focused on them. In our opinion, the Armenian experience has shown that revolutions are successful only if solidarity is stronger than selfishness. Also, if you do not hang labels, then even those people who are very disliked by the West will be ready to participate in the revolution, which is essentially still based on pro-Western principles. The contradiction between the people’s preference for diversity and the unity in the protest just shows that the conceptual factor that determines the revolution is not a preference but ideology - it is specific. It manifests as dissatisfaction and criticism of the social status quo.

V. WHAT’S THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA

In the 21st century, one of the main weapons, if not the most important, has become the Internet. As you know, the #Moishag movement, conceived by the head of the "Exit" parliamentary faction Nikol Pashinyan, began with live broadcasts on Pashinyan's Facebook page, when he set off on foot from Gyumri to Yerevan, having traveled this way in 14 days. All this time, both the coverage of the campaign and the round-the-clock actions that continued in Yerevan took place exclusively on the online platform. Armenian TV channels “did not notice” almost anything until the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan from the post of prime Minister.

The influence of the Internet during the period of the change of power was huge, and the most serious phenomenon was live broadcasts. We can assume that in the future this will be included in textbooks about the media, because the fact that everything happened live, Pashinyan went live on Facebook, the
negotiations were held live - all this was a very important turning point: the typical methods of propaganda did not work. Because people did not have to understand what was happening on the basis of indirect analyses, they were direct eyewitnesses, and were included in what was happening in the political life of the country. So the Internet has played a very important role. Of course, any revolutionary or civil movement is also inspired by various memes, and the network is their generator, and a certain flow has also formed in this direction. The interesting thing is that even foreign journalists were involved in all this, so the influence of the Internet was very great. It actually formed a very fast information field of a new type, throwing aside the traditional press. Although the traditional press has shaped this field. Let's not forget that uninterrupted live broadcasts were provided by journalists who worked day and night.

It is important to note that the huge threat of fake news was also minimized by live broadcasts. There was no possibility of misrepresentation.

David Hovhannisyan, one of the coordinators of the “Reject Serge” civil movement, notes that social networks played a huge role in the Armenian revolution:

“When we started our civic initiative, we understood that we had to use cutting-edge technologies for the success of the initiative. This concerned the use of the broad capabilities of social networks. All information about our initiative was published on Facebook. We informed about the actions on our Facebook pages and on the initiative page” (RIA News, 2018).

According to him, the velvet revolution became possible thanks to the victory of advanced technologies over the old information methods of the authorities: “The vast majority of TV channels and Internet media were under the control of the authorities, and Facebook became a free platform where the flow of information could not be controlled by the authorities. There, the information reached everyone who wanted to get it. In addition, the features of the Telegram messenger were also used. When the movement was gaining momentum, the activists created Telegram channels and actively informed people in Armenia and abroad about the events in the country”.

Sevak Mamyan, one of the co-founders of the Telegram channel Infocom, believes that with the help of this messenger, it has become possible to fight the manipulation of traditional media.

He is sure that the messenger became popular in the days of the revolution due to the fact that it worked with a weak Internet signal. This really turned out to be a problem, since, with a large crowd of people in one place, the Armenian Internet practically did not work.

The popularity of the messenger is also confirmed by the well-known journalist Ilya Azar, who writes in a report for Novaya Gazeta that many people learned about Pashinyan's release on April 23rd from the Baghramyan 26 channel.

The authors of the Baghramyan 26 channel wrote about the unique role of the telegram in the Armenian revolution. They note that the messenger has played an important role not only in informing about the events in Armenia but also in organizing the protests.

According to the authors of the channel, many activists were registered in telegram, but since Facebook is more widespread in Armenia, they created general chats, groups, and events on FB. They discussed all their actions in general chats, where they decided which street would be closed, which way they would go, and other important issues. But soon they discovered that their correspondence was being read by the security services and prevented the planned actions by sending security forces to the streets that the activists were going to block.

Analyzing the situation, the authors of the channel come to the conclusion that Facebook justified itself only as a platform where you can spread information to the masses, and telegram did what Facebook could not - provided the necessary security of correspondence and safe communication between the protesters.

The Armenian revolution was made possible by the violation of the promise of Serzh Sargsyan not to be re-elected, the determination of Nikol Pashinyan, the correct use of social media by the protesters, the law on spontaneous assemblies, and the decentralized struggle against the authorities. The danger of all these factors separately would easily have been reduced to zero by the authorities, but their combination disarmed Serzh Sargsyan.

VI. CONCLUSION: LESSONS OF THE ARMENIAN REVOLUTION

First, as a typical modern Eastern European election-guided revolution, the Armenian Revolution of 2018 manifested, as well as the examples of the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, three Ukrainian (1990, 2004, and 2014), Serbian (2000), Georgian (2003), and two Kyrgyz (2005 and 2010) revolutions, neither the economic situation nor the level of corruption is their direct causes, so that the resolution to success must be more likely to prone civic actions, rather than international meddling. Among the most important factors for the success of the revolution are:

the presence of organizational structures of citizens
1. the presence of legitimate representatives of citizens in government bodies at the national, regional, and local levels
2. in the absence of opportunities for elected representatives of citizens to official authorities, the formation of civil opposition bodies with alternative legitimacy
3. split of the ruling elite
4. the opposition has certain financial resources
5. the mass nature of protest actions (in the case of Russia – measured by at least several million participants)
6. the transition to the side of the opposition part of the security forces

A prerequisite for the victory of the democratic revolution in Russia is, essentially saying, the fundamental rejection of the Russian society of the imperial nature of the state system and the readiness to receive (grant, acquire) state independence by those peoples who will express themselves in favor of such independence. If the opposition faces a tough authoritarian political regime and deals with a tough authoritarian political leader (such as Ceausescu, Hussein, Gaddafi, Assad), a nonviolent resistance campaign under the velvet-orange option has no chance of success, and a peaceful transition to power to the opposition and the creation of a free political regime is impossible (see the examples of Romania, Iraq, Libya, Syria). In this case, either the opposition abandons the goals of the transition of society to a democratic political regime, or it is forced to use other tools to achieve this goal.

The access of the opposition to traditional media channels (television, radio, print) is important, even if not decisive. The new force that is quietly coming into effect is the new media. Although it is difficult to say that new social media played a decisive role in the Velvet Revolution, everything shows that its role is more likely to be prominent in future revolutionary movements.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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