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THE DEVELOPMENT OF UKRAINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FACE OF THE WAR TO PRESERVE INDEPENDENCE



ABSTRACT

Objective: *An in-depth analysis of the process of fostering civic and national consciousness among Ukrainians, which contributed to the widespread mobilization of society in defense of their own country and the development of civil society.*

Methods: *Theoretical methods, including a review of the literature on the subject, particularly the views of Ukrainian and European experts on research into the development of democracy and civil society. In addition, using descriptive analysis of statistical data from secondary sources, the study presents the societal challenges facing Ukraine resulting from demographic collapse and population decline caused by war-related losses and emigration.*

Results: *The armed conflict triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine has spurred civic engagement among the Ukrainian people. Ukrainian citizens lack democratic models in their history to which they could refer in the process of political, constitutional, and social transformations taking place in the country. A characteristic feature of Ukrainian society was a revolutionary approach to political change, rather than the evolution of a post-communist society toward a civil society.*

Discussion: *The war has also brought about a social revival among the Ukrainian population. If Ukraine does not change its pro-European course in foreign policy – culminating in accession to the European Union and NATO – and, in domestic policy, builds democratic structures and develops the characteristics of an open and socially active society, it will seize the opportunity to join the ranks of democratic nations.*

KEYWORDS: *civil society; self-organisation, post-Soviet societies; war; volunteering*

INTRODUCTION

Martial law in Ukraine, introduced throughout the country by decree of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky of February 24, 2022 in connection with the military aggression by the Russian Federation, for a period of 30 days and subsequently extended, released the ability of Ukrainian society to organize itself socially and accelerated the process of building a civil society. The Russian attack led to the consolidation of society and its integration around the Armed Forces, state institutions and public authorities at the national and local levels. That happened despite constant stress resulting from threats to life and health, economic difficulties, supply problems, material destruction, difficulties in accessing social services, separation from loved

ones and fear for those fighting on the front, and the dispersion of millions of Ukrainian citizens around the world, as a result of the refugee exodus and earlier economic emigration. At the turn of the XX and XXI centuries, a steady, although rather slow transformation of Ukrainian society from post-Soviet to pro-social was visible. The war, despite its negative consequences, had a positive impact on grassroots organizations of Ukrainians and social activities focusing on the current problems of the state and society (Potapenko, Tyshchenko, Kaplan, 2023).

The aim of the article is to provide an in-depth analysis of the growth of civic and state consciousness of Ukrainians, which contributed to the general mobilization of society to defend their state. In terms of socio-political passivity, which characterizes post-Soviet societies, such a change in Ukraine can be described as revolutionary. Thus, the process begun on Maidan is gradually being completed – the formation of a political nation convinced of the power of its agency.

The main issue is this: to what extent has the war contributed to the social self-organization of the Ukrainian people and the development of civil society? To what extent will the democratization of public and social life prove to be sustainable, thereby contributing to Ukraine's pro-European foreign policy?

Theoretical methods used in the research were primarily the analysis of the literature on the subject matter, including the opinions of Ukrainian and European experts on the subject of the research. In addition, using descriptive analysis of statistical data from secondary sources, the study presents the societal challenges facing Ukraine resulting from demographic collapse and population decline caused by war-related losses and emigration.

WAR AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL ACTIVITY IN UKRAINIAN SOCIETY – THEORETICAL CONTEXT

In the opinion of many political, scientific and social circles, the people of Ukraine have become the second front of the fight (Yarema, 2024), and the high morale and optimistic mood among the society regarding the defeat of the enemy are one of the most important factors influencing the victory in this war. The Ukrainian people have amazed the world with their courage, their readiness to repel the aggressor, their unity, their ability to quickly organize

themselves, and their commitment to their values (Hnatiuk, 2024). When analyzing the reasons behind this attitude among Ukrainians, it is worth mentioning several positive factors, such as the broad scope of social mobilization, the crossing of the critical threshold necessary for the creation of a civil society, the experience gained so far in self-organization (the Granite Revolution, the Orange Revolution, and the Revolution of Dignity), and the social resistance stemming from the activation of horizontal social ties, as well as an awareness of a protracted war, which for Ukrainian society began not in February 2022, but in February 2014. It was this community of citizens, not a nation defined in ethnic or cultural terms, that was stronger than many nation-states (Mygal, 2023).

The noticeable increase in civic and state consciousness of Ukrainians contributed to the general mobilization of people to defend their country, who realized that they could be a causative factor. In the opinion of Ukrainian experts, the passivity and civic helplessness that characterized Ukrainian society functioning in the straitjacket of one of the Soviet Union's republics is becoming a thing of the past, and the process of shaping a political nation, begun on Maidan, is slowly coming to an end (Vlasenko, Honiukova, Verbovyi, Shkabko, 2024, pp. 288-300).

According to many experts analyzing the development of civil society in Ukraine, distinct stages of its transformation can be observed. During the communist era, the activities of non-governmental organizations were controlled by the party and the government. This was characteristic of all Soviet satellite states. With the Gorbachev Thaw, civic organizations began to operate more actively, developing available areas of freedom and gradually expanding the scope of their activities (Maliszewska, 2015).

On January 21, 1990, one of the first forms of political participation in Ukraine appeared, called the *Unification Chain* action. The so-called *Ukrainian wave*, formed by people holding hands, symbolizing the unity of the Ukrainian nation, passed through Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Ternopil, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and its goal was to celebrate the anniversary of the unification of the Ukrainian People's Republic with the West Ukrainian People's Republic (Bortnikow, 2010, pp. 275-280).

Another protest action was organized in Kyiv from October 2 to 17, 1990. It was called the *Revolution on Granite*, and the demands of the starving students concerned, among other things, personnel changes in the Council

of Ministers of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Thanks to that initiative, Ukrainian society believed in its own capabilities and understood that it was able to influence the government through civic protests. Ukraine's independence in 1991 was partly the result of such protests.

The Ukrainians demonstrated further social disobedience in 2000-2001 under the slogan: *Ukraine without Kuchma*, pitching tents in the center of Kyiv and demanding the resignation of the country's president. That was a reaction to the brutal murder of Ukrainian investigative journalist Georgy Gongadze, of which President Leonid Kuchma was suspected.

Only a few years later, the independent Ukraine was engulfed by a wave of peaceful social protests that went down in the history of the nation as the Orange Revolution (November 2004-January 2005). According to scholars, it is considered one of the most important achievements of the civil society awakening to activity (Dzieduszycki, 2005, pp. 79-81). It was caused by the blatant rigging of the second round of the presidential elections by supporters of President Leonid Kuchma, to which the Ukrainian people did not agree. The Supreme Court invalidated the second round of the elections, and after the repeat voting for the president, Viktor Yushchenko won, receiving 52% of support. Although the Orange Revolution was an example of the activation of Ukrainian society around civic and moral values, during the upcoming years the society was unable to become the guardian of those values. Further actions of the president and his administration did not change the oligarchic government in Ukraine. Lobbying on behalf of only certain social groups to the detriment of the interests of the entire nation, the lack of economic reforms, and exerting pressure on the judiciary were actions that contradicted the statements made by Yushchenko's team on the Maidan (Kokorski, Kokorska, 2010, p. 237). Civil society in Ukraine was strong enough to oppose election fraud, but after the Orange Revolution it was unable to force politicians to act effectively (Vlasenko, Honiukova, Verbovyi, Shkabko, 2024, pp. 288-300). The reason for that was, among other things, the lack of broad public participation in civic activities, which resulted in a small number of non-governmental organizations and people acting in them (Maliszewska, 2015).

The Ukrainian society organized further social protests at the turn of November 2013 and February 2014 as part of the so-called Revolution

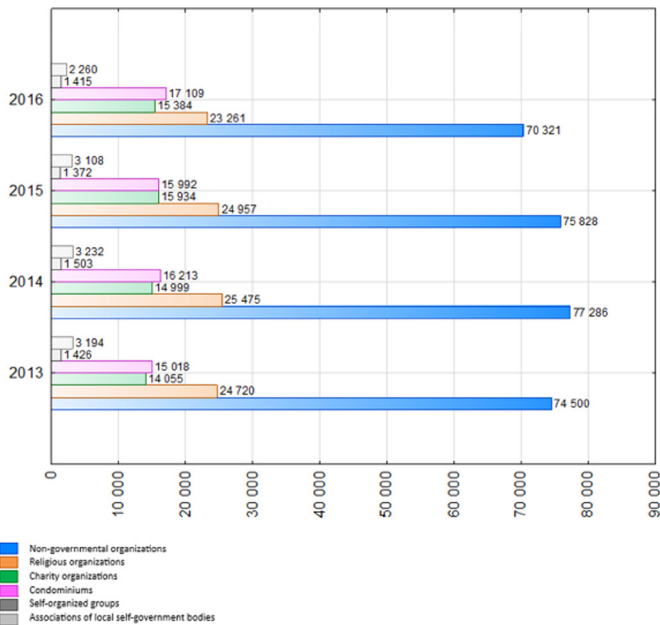
of Dignity, also known as the Eurorevolution. Its basis was dissatisfaction with the departure from the pro-European course and the excessive concentration of power in the hands of Viktor Yanukovych and his associates. This time, the bloody clashes on Independence Square in Kiev resulted in the overthrow of President Yanukovych's government and new elections of pro-European politicians: Petro Poroshenko as the president of the country and the appointment of Arseniy Yatsenyuk as the prime minister of the government of Ukraine. The result of the actions that took place in Ukraine at that time was, among others, the invasion of Crimea by pro-Russian armed groups and ultimately its annexation on March 18, 2014, as well as mass pro-Russian protests in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Zabyelina, 2017, pp. 55-78). The consequence of the further escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine was a full-scale armed invasion, launched on February 24, 2022.

Bringing up the main thread of considerations regarding the condition of civil society in Ukraine, based on the research report conducted by experts from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2017), it can be indicated that:

- volunteer associations at the local level enjoy a high level of trust among community groups and citizens;
- volunteer associations that do not place much emphasis on formalities and are reluctant to submit public reports on their activities;
- an organized civil society that reacts to high-profile events in the country reactively rather than proactively;
- organizations formed on an ad hoc basis, with limited access to capital and low levels of investment;
- state support for non-governmental organizations is not consistent, but rather fragmented or sporadic, mainly due to limited objectives, tasks, and financial resources.

For the purposes of this study on the development of civil society, data on social entities characteristic of the nongovernmental sector between 2013 and 2016 were selected from a United Nations Development Program report. Business, industry, and labor organizations were excluded (Chart 1).

Chart 1. Summary of the number of registered non-governmental organizations in Ukraine between 2013-2016



Source: compiled by the authors based on: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Defining civil society for Ukraine. Summary of the research report*. Accessed August 27, 2025, at: <https://www.undp.org/ukraine/publications/defining-civil-society-ukraine>.

Data collected by UNDP experts indicate that during the period in question, the number of non-governmental, religious and charitable organizations systematically decreased, while self-help groups and housing communities increased. The number of associations of local government bodies and volunteers gathered around them also decreased significantly.

What were the reasons for the decreasing number of third sector entities? The following diagnosis of the problem can be found in the literature on the subject (Radziszewski, 2016): Firstly, the lack of a strong identity of Ukrainian citizens, which for centuries has been torn between different powers and incorporated into the cultural and civilizational space, sometimes Eastern,

sometimes Western. Second, Ukraine has not always had the opportunity to develop its own statehood. Thus, in the long term, it did not have sufficient experience in creating civic activity. All acts of disobedience to the authorities, as recent years have shown, were not the result of evolutionary changes, but an element of revolutionary rebellion against the hated authorities. Third, some societies of post-Soviet countries, as exemplified by Ukraine, did not demonstrate significant levels of social capital and had no experience of functioning within a civil society. They were therefore sterile from any manifestations of civic awareness, which until recently was felt in the social space. Fourth, the lack of appropriate resources of social capital was manifested in a general lack of trust in other members of society, and above all, a lack of trust in politicians, which had been entrenched in society for years. Fifth, one of the reasons for the failure to develop social capital by Ukrainians was the recollection of the communist system, based on social isolation. It consisted in the fact that communication taking place above social microstructures was controlled by state censorship. Residents were therefore left with relationships within the family space and a trusted group of friends and acquaintances, because public life was completely controlled by the authorities.

Has Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to a change in the self-organization of Ukrainian society? In answering this question in the affirmative, it is worth noting that the number of nongovernmental organizations has been growing rapidly since 2022. It was the war that triggered a wave of mass self-organization within society and the volunteer sector. In 2022, official data recorded approximately 96,500 nongovernmental organizations. By 2024, this number had risen sharply, exceeding 104,000 registered entities (Balabai, 2025). In contrast, figures for the last two years (2025–2026) indicate stabilization in the nongovernmental sector, and global databases (e.g., GlobalGiving Atlas) aggregate profiles of over 41,000 charitable and aid organizations directly active in the country. The largest growth in the third sector (by over 43%) was recorded by foundations with a strictly humanitarian and charitable focus (GlobalGiving Atlas, 2026).

Generally speaking, between 2014 and 2025, Ukrainian civil society transformed from a scattered collection of activist movements into a diverse ecosystem, responding to the needs of society and contributing to the country's

resilience – including that of its people – in the face of the hardships of war, while also legitimizing the government's actions.

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE UKRAINIAN SOCIETY'S CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL SELF-ORGANIZATION

Under these political, social, and military conditions, the Ukrainian state and society became, against their will, the target of an armed invasion by the Russian Federation in February 2022. The war served as a catalyst for launching civic initiatives to defend the homeland and mobilized the latent social capital within society. Ukrainian civil society organizations have demonstrated that they are capable of supporting the state and uniting millions of people in their country and around the world in defense against Russian aggression (Bazhenova, 2022). During this time, there was also a sharp increase in the number of civil society and charitable organizations registered by state agencies. While in 2010 Ukraine ranked 150th in the world in terms of volunteering in the World Giving Index, with only 5% of citizens being active in that field, in 2018 it moved up to 81st place. According to the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, from February 24 to June 30, 2022, 4,365 civil society organizations were registered in the country, including 3,364 charitable and 1,001 social organizations. The key difference between those organizations is the purpose of their activities: charities are engaged in charitable activities, while social organizations aim to combine efforts to solve specific problems. Some organizations have been established recently, while others previously operated informally and have now applied for official status. Thus, since the Russian invasion, the volunteer movement has undoubtedly become one of the most significant social phenomena in Ukraine. Public organizations, volunteers, charitable foundations and ordinary but active citizens quickly united to solve various problems, support the army or the affected population. Among the organizations, there are official ones, registered in the state registry, which allows them to conduct multiway activities and cooperate with international institutions and legal entities, as well as receive grants from the government of Ukraine and supporting countries. Informal organizations

are created ad hoc, spontaneously, under the influence of the need of the moment, in response to current needs. They do not have legal status, they act on their own behalf as private individuals and cannot accept funding from legal entities. Most often, they meet a small range of needs, for example, they collect food and things for victims of warfare or buy ammunition for specific people – relatives or friends from territorial defense units. Such an activity is based on informal social capital resources, people are united by mutual trust and the desire to help in a situation of military threat. The main areas of volunteer work include: supplying the Ukrainian armed forces with ammunition and military equipment; evacuating and transporting refugees and internally displaced persons; donating blood; searching for children and their parents; finding shelter for war victims; delivering clothing, food, medicine, and essential supplies; rescuing animals; assisting elderly people living alone; and providing informational support. Furthermore, the vast majority of activities focus on meeting the needs of the Ukrainian army and territorial defense, as well as providing assistance to displaced persons and those affected by the war. In reality, they largely perform the functions of state structures, which are often ineffective due to bureaucratic delays and a lack of funds, especially in wartime conditions. One example of such an initiative is the *Return Alive* foundation, which has been supporting the army since 2014. Its mission is solely to provide technology, training, and ammunition to save the lives of Ukrainians and help soldiers defend Ukraine. Since the program's inception, over \$45 million has been raised from more than 50 countries (Foundation *Stand with Ukraine*, 2025).

The development of the civil society sector in Ukraine has not been entirely successful. The introduction of an automated system for tracking humanitarian aid – designed to ensure transparency in the flow of goods and funds – has, in practice, complicated the operations of many foundations, especially those without substantial administrative resources, and, according to NGOs, has made it impossible for individual volunteers to carry out their work. In addition, NGOs are facing an increased number of tax audits and general fiscal pressure. Tax regulations are often unclear, and penalties are imposed retroactively for aid that has already been provided. Another issue is burnout and emotional exhaustion among staff and volunteers. They operate under

constant stress, amid air raid alarms and warnings, and under immense emotional pressure, which leads to widespread professional burnout. The activists themselves admit that there is a lack of funds for psychological support and professional development, and without these, their human resources simply run out. Consequently, Ukrainian NGOs are increasingly facing a shortage of manpower and financial resources. The most active men (leaders, managers) have joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), while thousands of specialists (often women with children) have been forced to migrate. Financial instability is evident in the fact that most aid initiatives rely on short-term grants, which makes planning impossible and leads to the phenomenon of *grant hopping* (jumping from project to project).

Summing up the self-organization of Ukrainian society in terms of the threat of war, it can be said that it underwent a rapid reorganization, which was forced by the dynamics of the actions on the front. According to many experts, the non-governmental movement has become a specific volunteer front, in which millions of citizens participate, supporting soldiers and civilians struggling with the hardships of war. Their activities are based on trust, the need to act in a crisis situation, and the desire to help other people. The social capital that has been activated, both formally and informally, brings hope for victory, even if the road to it is still long. The Russian invasion contributed to the consolidation of Ukrainian society on the front and in the rest of the country, and also to a significant extent to the growth of mutual trust among citizens. That creates favorable conditions for socio-economic changes, which consequently may become a significant motivating factor for the reconstruction of the country in the future. Another positive phenomenon is the increase in the level of social control. Independent media are gaining importance (which was also contributed to by the process of deoligarchization of the media), increasingly effectively monitoring and informing the public opinion about the activities of not only the authorities, but also the political and financial elites in general. It is thanks to the media that most corruption scandals have been revealed and publicized. These processes have a significant impact on Ukraine's accession to the European Union. According to the European Commission, Ukraine is at a moderate level of preparedness for membership in the European Union. Progress has improved in 15 negotiation areas, with progress rated as high in

12 of them and no regression noted in any of them. The European Commission notes that Ukraine still faces the need to implement highly complex and costly structural reforms, particularly in the areas of combating corruption, judicial independence, and the functioning of a market economy amid ongoing war. In assessing the level of civil society development, the European Commission highlights the active role of nongovernmental organizations and civic movements. EU commissioners regularly commend them for exercising democratic oversight of government actions, fighting corruption, and engaging in the country's reconstruction efforts (European Commission, 2025).

The Ukrainian government's adoption in March 2025 of the 2025–2026 Action Plan for the Development of Civil Society was viewed positively. This document implements specific measures to improve public consultation, digitize NGO registration, and introduce tax incentives for social activities (csometer.info, 2026). Despite this, Brussels continues to express concerns regarding the full independence of certain state institutions from political influence and the need to maintain full information pluralism (European Disability Forum, 2026).

It is also worth noting that not only the role of independent media is growing, but also that of veterans and youth. The former, after the end of the war, even if they do not actively participate in political life, their voice will be significant. According to IRI research from January 2023, 63% of Ukrainians have someone in their family who is fighting; 95% trust the Armed Forces of Ukraine; 93% – veterans returning from the front; and that is an upward trend. At the same time, 91% of respondents believe that society treats veterans appropriately, while only 53% believe that the state is able to take care of them. However, less than half of Ukrainians would like to see veterans become politicians, which reflects the general attitude toward politicians (Kaczmarek, 2023). The state authorities have great hopes for the young generation of Ukrainians to return to their homeland and help rebuild the country. As it results from the declarations, as many as 76% of them want to return after the end of the war and begin the process of restoring the country to its pre-war life. The Ukrainian Youth Fund was launched specifically with them and their associations in mind, serving as a new yet effective tool to support the country's reconstruction. The program is aimed at youth non-governmental organizations, which can

apply for grants to implement interesting social projects and for their own development. The primary focus is on rebuilding economic potential and creating jobs. Rebuilding Ukraine also means halting the demographic crisis and the aging of the population that the country is facing. International experts point out that even before the war, Ukraine was a country with alarming demographic trends: an aging population and a dramatically declining birth rate. The war has exacerbated these challenges, and five million women and children have fled to higher-income countries where Ukrainians could obtain local work permits. As the war drags on, some refugees will find work and decide to settle abroad. This applies especially to young people, who will start families there and have children (Blinov, Djanko, 2022, pp. 164-168).

The war that has been ongoing since 2022 has had a significant impact on changes in Ukraine's population between 2021 and 2025. In 2021, Ukraine's population stood at approximately 43,127,334. As a result of Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, there was a mass migration of people from Ukraine to neighboring countries, mainly to the European Union, including Poland (Skrabacz, Bsoul-Kopowska, Baylis, 2024). It is estimated that by the end of 2022, about 8 million people had left the country due to the war, both through refugees and internal migration. In addition, many Ukrainians remained in the country, but moved to less threatened regions. The International Monetary Fund estimated Ukraine's population in 2024 at 33.3 million. The United Nations also provides similar figures. The World Population Prospects 2024 report cites a population of 37.9 million. After subtracting an estimated 4.5 – 5 million people residing in temporarily occupied territories, this yields a figure of 32.9 – 33.4 million – a result consistent with other sources (Manuilow, 2025). It is worth adding that the demographic situation in Ukraine is still dynamic and changes depending on the development of the conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the difficult economic situation and the full-scale hostilities that have been underway since February 2022, public sentiment remains optimistic. In February 2023, as many as 93% of Ukrainians believed that the country's future was good, and 97% believed in victory in the war. The level of support

for Ukraine's membership in the European Union (85%) and NATO (82%) is stable, although it is not known how long the accession processes to these structures will last (Olchowski, 2023). However, this situation may change: postwar reconstruction challenges, as well as economic, political, and social instability, may prove more difficult to overcome than the war itself. Signs of these problems are already evident in the level of trust in Volodymyr Zelenskyy. After the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, 80 percent of Ukrainians trusted President Zelenskyy. However, by February 2022, the level of trust had gradually fallen to 37 percent, and on the eve of the Russian invasion, there were already more people who did not trust him. After the invasion, the trust level rose to 90 percent. He enjoyed a level of public trust unprecedented in the country's recent history (Vakulina, 2025). At that time, both along the Dnieper and around the world, he was regarded as a national hero and called a statesman. In the following years, confidence gradually declined: to 77 percent by the end of December 2023, to 64 percent in February 2024, and to 59 percent in May 2024. At the same time, these figures remained virtually unchanged from May through September 2024 (KMIS, 2025). In the first half of May 2025, 74% of Ukrainians trusted President V. Zelenskyy, while 22% did not trust him (Ukrinform, 2025).

The reconstruction of Ukraine assumes a new way of cooperation between the authorities and civil society. Ukrainians have been proving for years that they are ready to fight for victory, but also that civil society should play an even stronger role in the future of Ukraine. Will this happen? Currently, the answer to this question is not clear, as emphasized by the Ukrainian political scientist, pointing to the huge problems with the corrupt judiciary, law enforcement agencies and many state institutions, and calling Ukrainian democracy *hybrid* (Szozzyn, 2024).

The military conflict caused by Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine was a kind of catalyst for building civil society in this country. A feature of Ukrainian society was a revolutionary approach to political changes, not the evolution of post-communist society into a civil society. The war, along with its cruelty, also brought social revival among the Ukrainian population. People who remained or returned from temporary exile understood that they had opportunities for civic participation, they just had to be skillfully

used and launched as non-governmental organizations and semi-formal or informal social movements. What is more, people living in economic or forced emigration experienced the organization of civil society in countries with well-established democratic traditions and they transfer such models to the nation. If Ukraine does not change its pro-European course in its foreign policy, culminating in accession to the European Union and NATO, and in its domestic policy it builds democratic structures and develops the attributes of an open and socially active society, it will seize the opportunity to join the ranks of democratic states.

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