

THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES' POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH CHINA: GOALS, RESULTS AND PROSPECTS

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1. Introduction

The relevance of individual Visegrad countries in Beijing's foreign policy shows significant stereotype: they are traditionally viewed as small countries. This opinion did not vanish despite the declarative importance of 16+1 relations and the V4-China cooperative formats on the side of China. Even though the V4 countries show the high potential for trade and investments among the 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, there has been a minimal annual increase of the economic statistics since 2011/2012. At the same time the Balkan states have received more tangible political attention of Beijing, as could be seen for example by prioritizing them as the hosts of annual 16+1 summits (2013 in Bucharest and 2014 in Belgrade), and declaring strategic partnerships (Serbia and Albania).

The common knowledge of the CEE in China has been so far minimal and originated from the context of Russian and East European studies, which does not entirely fit the present realities of these countries. This is even more true for Central Europe, which tend to perceive itself historically and culturally as a specific region between Western and Eastern European tradition. This might explain the so far limited range of Chinese middle and large scale investment projects in the V4 states that noticeably lag behind the Korean, Japanese and Taiwanese investments, which received basic political backing, but never attached to superfluous political and bureaucratic agendas. On the other hand, trading Chinese goods and trade inflows into V4 confirms the advanced level of market liberalization, as the result of their generally liberal trade policies achieved after the transformation and reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s.

There is therefore a remaining great challenge for V4 states' diplomacies to attract Chinese public from the predominantly pragmatic and economy

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focused attention, and increase the Chinese understanding of CEE cultural and historical identity and relevance. In political and economic agenda, the V4 group is potentially the one of possible regional groups, which may be interested to set their agendas into closer coordinated strategy in 16+1, respectively in 4+12+1 format.

This chapter is discussing political relations of four Visegrad states with the People's Republic of China (PRC), and explores the impact of the so-called "Warsaw initiative" on their recent development. Did the diplomatic effort of the two most ambitious states Poland and Hungary push forward the relations with China, or was the dynamic influenced mostly by the establishing of 16+1 format and the leading role of Beijing? How far the V4 states benefit from the format of 16+1, and what the V4 are supposed to do to increase their image in the eyes of Beijing? Should the V4 group consider any effort at closer coordination of individual bilateral policies of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia?

To present the answers to these questions, this chapter will start with a short summary of the recent development of political relations between the V4 countries and China, especially since the summits in Budapest in 2011 and in Warsaw in 2012. It will be claimed that it is China who is the driving force of the 16+1 project and the V4-China relations and therefore to understand the dynamics and possible future paths it is imperative to recognize Chinese intentions vis-à-vis the V4 countries. It should be admitted that intentions and goals of countries in foreign affairs cannot be scientifically proved and it is even more the case of China due to still very much hidden nature of its political system. Therefore, we will interpret Chinese intentions in the V4/CEE16 based on its behavior and the general foreign policy interests.

Two alternative theories explaining Chinese approach in the V4 regions will be presented. First one is based on the assertion that it is foremost economics, which motivates China to build relations with the V4 countries, therefore the political relations serve as the facilitator for the business interests. Second works with a seemingly countering rationale and it claims that it is the long term strategic goal of China to develop stable relations with the countries in the region and the economics serve as a means to achieve the goal of stable political relations. While these two theories might seem to be in direct conflict, it must be acknowledged that the difference may be to a large extent determined by a viewpoint and definition. Due to the authoritarian nature of China, the economic development is in fact one of the core national interests and legitimizer of the Chinese government and hence an economic performance is also a crucial political goal, even more than it is the case of Western democratic countries.

2. Comparative perspective of the development in V4-China relations

Visegrad countries appeared to be high in the Chinese focus from the beginning of its recent rapprochement with the CEE region. The initial 16+1 business forum took place in Budapest in 2011 and saw Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visiting Budapest. The year after Warsaw hosted the first summit of the heads of the government where Wen Jiabao presented the '12-measure initiative', which marked the formal beginning of the 16+1 platform. Besides, Poland became a strategic partner of China in 2011, both as a sign of already intensive contacts between the countries and acknowledging the mutual interest in further forging close relations. Furthermore, Hungary had long been considered as the most stable Chinese partner in the region, hosting vast majority of the Chinese investments, largest Chinese community and the most developed cultural relations among the CEE16. On the top of that, Chinese president Hu Jintao visited Slovakia in 2009, which can be also regarded as an express of high-level political interest in the V4. Yet, the things seem to be changing. The 16+1 summit in 2013 took place in Bucharest and this year's gathering has been recently called for December 2014 in Beograd, irrespective of attempts of both the Czech Republic and Slovakia to host the event. Similarly, Hungary did not elevate its relations with China to a strategic partnership level, although Serbia and Albania have done so (see Tesař 2014).

To demonstrate dynamics of the recent development of the V4-Chinese relations, the Czech case is an interesting example at the moment. The political relations of the Czech Republic with China belonged to the coldest ones in Europe. The biggest crises in Czech-Chinese relations happened in 1990, when President Havel received the visit of the Dalai Lama in Prague; then in 1995 on the occasion of arrival of the Prime Minister Lien Chan led delegation from Taiwan in Prague; and President Havel's verbal support for Taiwan's independence in the UN session in the same year. The recent crisis with respect to tough response of Beijing happened in 2009 after another visit of the Dalai Lama in Prague and his meeting with the Czech Premier Jan Fischer. The government level mutual visits ended and the Beijing's authorities significantly reduced all official ties with Czech diplomats. The only exception was short meeting of the Prime Minister Nečas with his counterpart in the Warsaw 16+1 meeting. Nevertheless, the crisis in official political ties did not stop annual meetings of regional representatives and widely developing relations in the field of trade, environmental protection, academia and culture.

Paradoxically, among all the 16 CEE states, the Czech political attitude towards Beijing recently revealed the most positive shift as a result of the Warsaw initiative's attainment. The positive change in Czech policy

towards China resulted from two strong impulses: firstly from a domestic shift in political establishment in 2013 after the fall of liberal-conservative cabinet and result of first direct presidential elections that saw a comeback of social-democratic strong person Miloš Zeman back to Czech high policy; and secondly from the outside, i.e. the Chinese move to establish the Warsaw initiative that brought Prague back from the temporary diplomatic blockade of China.

Czech political agenda with China accelerated significantly since 2013: at first by conducting the Czech-Chinese Economic Forum in Prague in November 2013, and the following session in 2014. Besides, the Czech minister of foreign affairs Lubomír Zaorálek arrived in Beijing in April 2014, 16 years after the last visit of his predecessor. The other Czech delegation led by minister of industry and trade appeared in China in June 2014, and the Czech diplomatic offensive culminated by arrival of President Miloš Zeman in the PRC in October 2014.

Compared to other V4 countries, the current Czech ‘China-policy’ seems to have moved towards the most China-friendly, second only to Hungary. Orbán government, ruling since 2010, had taken an unprecedented scope with regards his China-policy, most recently culminating in the comments that Hungary should consider moving away from the liberal democratic system and learning from the successes of countries like Russia and China, to serve the Hungarian national interest (Orbán 2014). In fact, this direction of Hungarian foreign policy is making it somewhat different from its V4 colleagues – it is widely acknowledged that the prime motivation of the V4 countries in forging relations with China comes from the economics (see e.g. Golonka 2012). With the strong criticism Hungary has been receiving from the EU and the US with regards its domestic political development, China has become a hedging factor vis-à-vis the Western partners. On the other hand, this China-friendly approach is likely to be motivated by the financial problems and the conviction, that China would reward positive political gestures financially.

This belief was seemingly held, too, in Slovakia during the first Fico left-wing government in 2006-2010; yet, the second Fico government after 2012 seems to revise its China policy. After the consideration of employing a Chinese company to build Slovak highways, which was later on abandoned, Slovakia now does not appear to have any huge expectations from China recently, its foreign minister even mentioned the topic of human rights to visiting Chinese delegation and human rights activists were allowed their public demonstration during the visit – something which did not happen in 2006-2010 (see Pleschová 2014, 55-56). Relatively good

financial situation of the country might help to sustain this position, when Slovakia is currently able to sell its bonds at the capital markets at the historically lowest rates (Ministry of Finance 2014).

The largest among the V4 and the CEE16 countries, Poland is sometimes perceived as a front runner of the whole group, although not without contestation. This position may be earned as much by its size, geography and perceived economic potential, as by its relatively pragmatic and stable approach towards China, at least since its accession to the EU in 2004 and later on since 2008. Poland has combined strong desire of developing close partnership with China with its value-laden position, when it, for instance, emphasizes its historical experience with the workers' rights. At present there exist a complex framework of contacts between the two sides, which include highest political levels, regional governments, business forums, cultural exchanges, academic, and research oriented and others (see Szczudlik-Tatar 2014). Warsaw was also the venue of the first summit of the heads of government of China and 16 CEE countries, which gave the whole project a nickname as 'Warsaw initiative'.

The collected evidence of the relations between the V4 countries and China, with the special focus on the most recent period, shows a number of interesting points. It is China who is the driving force behind the recent increase of contacts, especially in the form 16+1 platform. However, there is no clear and detailed plan in the Chinese strategic calculation for specific micro regions and individual states, and the quality of bilateral relations with individual countries mirror to some extent their approach. Yet, China does not seem to expect an all-out political support from these countries, as shown by the lack of rewards offered after the China-friendly gestures of Hungary, currently the Czech Republic, and in the past Slovakia. In particular, different political strategies of individual V4 countries did not lead to significantly different levels of economic exchanges with China, which is still relatively low especially in the amount of received investments from China.

3. China – V4 relations: the Devil's Advocate approach

According to the Chinese way of thinking, friendship has to be established first, in order to facilitate good business relations later. A question somewhat suspicious Western diplomats have been asking at least since the Warsaw 2012 summit goes: "*Why is Central Europe so important for Beijing now, what is so special about these sixteen countries?*" In fact, nothing is. China has built splendid political relations with many countries and regions all around the world where it has hoped to find potential trade and investment opportunities. Having developed its global presence in

Africa, Asia or Latin America for decades, China had to find new and maybe somewhat less obvious partners. The crisis of the European Union and the resulting financial vacuum revealed potential opportunities in the CEE region. Even though these opportunities are modest compared to the usual Chinese appetite, Beijing has to utilize every possible chance to find business projects for the overcapacity of its companies and for its abundant financial assets.

According to publicly available information, China wants to keep its activities in the economic sphere in the CEE region and to avoid potential international political tensions. The exclusion of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova from the 16+1 project signals that Beijing regards these countries too important to Moscow to interfere.² Furthermore the regular invitation of EU officials to 16+1 discussions attempts to lull any suspicions about the nature of the cooperation, even though the effectiveness of these communication measures needs some further polishing, but the intention is clear. Indeed, there are no signs of any political request from the Chinese side, which could be considered as maleficent from the EU's perspective. Hence, both China and the Central European countries emphasize that the 16+1 can only be interpreted in the context of general EU-China relations.

Still, we have to face some problems when it comes to the future and progress of the 16+1 initiative. In the following some major contradictions that might jeopardize the success of the entire project would be spotlighted.

3.1. Size and complexity

When China created the 16+1 cooperation it invited all countries between the traditional 'West' and 'East' from the Baltic to Balkans, with the exception of Belarus, Ukraine, Kosovo and Moldova. To put it simple, China has established a framework with the countries of the so-called "New Europe" and with those to join the club in the future. This initiative is not unprecedented; the China-Nordic cooperation could be seen as a predecessor to some extent.

Meanwhile, there are some questions with regard to the effectiveness of such a broad and comprehensive cooperation of seventeen countries very different in size, economic and political status. According to personal talks with researchers, the Chinese side is aware of the complexity of the CEE region, therefore evaluation of possible sub-regional forums, like a China-V4 dialogue, is already on the table. However, it seems that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not support such ideas. The dip-

²Kosovo was excluded since China did not acknowledge the independence of the country.

lomatic corps values the 16+1 mostly as a transaction cost reducing tool, which gathers sixteen leaders at once. The sub-regional level would erode this feature of the China-CEE cooperation; therefore Beijing is unlikely to support a V4-China forum. It also seems improbable to work out common V4 standpoints vis-à-vis China since the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are mostly competing with each other for Beijing's attention.

3.2. Trade and investment issues

Although capital and trade seeking CEE countries look at China as a potential source of foreign direct investment and trade opportunities, there are serious doubts about their governments' ability to influence bilateral economic cooperation between their respective nations and China. In the fields of FDI issues there is a fundamental contradiction between Chinese and Central European intentions. While China is mostly looking for infrastructure investment opportunities (preferably through governmental public procurements), most CEE countries are keen to attract greenfield investments in order to create jobs and industrial production. However, according to the dataset of China Global Investment Tracker of the Heritage Foundation,³ China has barely set up any new facilities in the region. Chinese companies rather pursued acquisitions or infrastructure building opportunities. Central European EU member states can apply for non-refundable financial support for infrastructure development; therefore Chinese loans are not attractive, while any attempts to pay off Chinese construction companies from European funds might likely provoke political turbulences. Both sides are looking for something different, which is a fundamental problem.

When it comes to merchandize trade issues the role to be played by CEE governments seems to be even more modest. In the case of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia approximately 90 percent of exports to China is produced by foreign owned multinational companies. It is clear that governments in Budapest, Bratislava or Prague cannot really influence such trade relations; no matter how good (or bad) their relations are with Beijing. Meanwhile SMEs in Central Europe are usually too weak to facilitate their own business relations with Chinese counterparts. This is also a serious problem to be addressed.

³<http://www.heritage.org/research/projects/china-global-investment-tracker-interactive-map>

3.3. Structural contradictions

If one looks at the proposed fields of cooperation⁴ between China and the EU members of the 16 countries, it could be found that the two sides would like to work together in spheres, which are mostly regulated by Brussels. The rules of the investment, trade or financial environment are set by the EU at large, or even when it comes to the details of tourism (visa issues), it is clear that EU member states of the region, especially Eurozone and/or Schengen Area members cannot do too much on the governmental or policy level to please the Chinese side. It is the business community, which could really facilitate these relations, but then the actual role of the 16+1 mechanism is questionable. Meanwhile such areas of potential cooperation where member states still enjoy their full sovereignty, like education or culture, are being developed mostly on a bilateral level. Thus the role of the 16+1 (or a theoretical 4+1) cooperation seems to be unnecessary there as well.

All of the above-mentioned structural contradictions might lead us to a surprisingly ironic conclusion: although Central European EU members have done all efforts to advertise themselves as a prospective hub, centre, or bridge for China in the European Union, it seems that non-EU countries could be more attractive to Beijing. Personal consultations with Chinese experts have confirmed this assumption. It has been admitted that countries, where EU regulations and standards do not exist (or are weak at least) could be much more alluring to Chinese businesses. Recent successful deals between China and some Western and Eastern Balkan countries could also provide some evidence to this perception.

4. Chinese goals and Visegrad expectations:

Poor match or slow start?

The level of Chinese presence in the V4 should not be exaggerated. In fact, when measured economically, China is in a number of aspects behind other East Asian economies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. However, much of Chinese influence comes from the expectations held around the region about the ‘massive’ increase in economic interaction, most recently especially in the form of received investments. So far, however, we have not seen any significant increase of economic activities or new investments, which could be explained by the recent increase in political activities.

⁴<http://gov.ro/en/news/the-bucharest-guidelines-for-cooperation-between-china-and-central-and-eastern-european-countries>

This begs the question of whether China's interest in V4 is more political than economic. At present it would indeed seem that 'politics is hotter than economics' as the political and other contacts between the two sides have developed further than the economic ones. It remains to be seen, whether this would change and Chinese investors would discover economic benefits of investing in the region and/or V4 companies will become able to export to China. It has been long argued that the V4 countries are potentially well positioned to serve as a base for the activities of Chinese companies in the Western Europe, who could use the favorable ratio between the cost and quality of inputs here and the geographical proximity (see e.g. Matura 2012; Szczudlik-Tatar 2010; Clegg and Voss 2012; Zhang, Yang and Van Den Bulcke 2013). The V4 countries could also serve as a 'training ground' for Chinese companies to get familiar with the EU rules before investing in the Western Europe on a larger scale. This was perhaps one of the goals behind the COVEC investment in Poland. However, the COVEC investment failed and the V4 still waits for another major Chinese investments – or in fact any increase of incoming Chinese investments.

It is not clear whether Chinese investors are interested in trying to conquer the difficulties of establishing their business in the V4 as the intermediate means if their final goal is the Western Europe. Perhaps they would choose to go straight for the real thing and establish their physical presence in the Western Europe. We should also keep in mind relatively complex investment environment in the V4 countries, general Chinese lack of knowledge about the culture, languages, political and social environment of the V4 region, etc. Other issues make this region less attractive for potential Chinese investors, such as government inefficiencies, corruption and the lack of world class technology and famous brands.

The Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and CEE countries, issued during the Meeting of Heads of Government of China and CEE countries in Romania in November 2013, is the last official document, which can be read as a formal expression of Chinese intents in the region. China offers the CEE countries increased investment and trade volumes, as well as increased cooperation in the fields of science, education, technology, people to people exchanges and infrastructure development. One of the highlights of the document is the designation of 2014 as the China-CEE Investment and Business Promotion Year. While the scope of cooperation and interaction between the sides is surely aimed at boosting the business links, there still appears to be more than a simple business facilitation would expect. If the 16+1 platform and Chinese goals in the region were economic, would it be necessary or

profitable to invest this much of political attention and capital to support non-economic initiatives? The wide scope of the 16+1 initiative thus may support the assertion that Chinese goals in the CEE region and/or V4 may be at the end more political than economic.

The possibility of Chinese political goals in the CEE sounds like a nightmare to many in Brussels and even the politicians and public in the CEE, who often hold rather critical perspective of China. This may be the reason why Chinese leaders, researchers or media never announce it and instead keep the official line of economic goals, on the basis of win-win cooperation. However, Chinese political goals in the region do not have to be necessarily worrying. It is reasonable to assume, that Chinese goals in the CEE/V4 region will be in line with their general foreign policy interests. The three “core national interests” of China, according to former State Secretary Dai Bingguo (2010), are the preservation of the state system and leadership of the Chinese Communist Party; territorial integrity and national sovereignty; and the sustainable development of the economy and society. Europe plays a critically important role for China’s development as a major economic partner, supplier of technology and investments, but also possessing significant political influence holding two of the UN Security Council permanent seats, not talking about the level of international legitimacy and soft power, which European stance enjoys worldwide. China has also for a long time called for the establishment of a multipolar world which is presumably better suited for China than a world with a single ‘hegemon’ – the US. According to this scenario, the role of the EU is crucial here for it is the most likely candidate to become another ‘pole’, and without which the multipolar world would be hardly achievable. Shortly, reasonably united and strong Europe is an important partner for China both economically and politically (for elaboration of this argumentation see Turcsányi 2013).

It is obvious that China’s interest in the V4 countries increased rapidly after they joined the EU. Similarly, countries involved in the 16+1 platform, which are not members of the EU, yet are expected to join sooner or later, which seems to be, in fact, the defining characteristic of the grouping. That China does not want to act like an alternative to the EU is demonstrated by its relations with Hungary, which were arguably not rewarded in any way for their strong support of China. China clearly wants to build a stable relation with the countries which form an important decision making power within the EU and not with the ‘EU rebels’. This way, China understandably wants to control to some extent EU internal decision making and the V4 plays important role here with the number of members of the European parliament larger than the one of Germany and an equal voting power in

the Council of the EU as Germany and France combined. Moreover, there are also voices about a larger China geopolitical strategy in developing better relation with the CEE16 countries. China is aware that the space between Germany and Russia has been historically very sensitive and it might be interested to preserve its stability, both for economic reasons of facilitating smooth connection with the Western Europe, but also possibly to check any potential Russian rise which would be geopolitically threatening to China.⁵

While the idea of China building a position to influence thinking of the V4 and the EU may sound as sensible, it should be admitted that this is a normal diplomatic practice in international politics. It may be comforting to some extent, that there is no clear evidence that China would be interested in playing the dividing role in the EU – and it is a long way from having the capacity to do so, if it ever reaches it.

To sum up, there are a number of reasons why China is interested in developing political relations with the V4 region. While on the side of the V4 countries economics prevails – even in the case of Hungary – it is not clear whether China is actually interested in rapid increase of its economic activities in the region. Economics or economic promises may serve as a way of increasing its influence in the region, but unless the V4 countries would decide to bend the EU and OECD rules or until China would develop capacity to play with these rules, no rapid increase is to be expected. On the other hand, when China develops sufficient capacity to compete in the EU, much of its attention will probably focus on Western Europe. The role of the V4 and CEE16 may then become of what it is today for Korean, Japanese and Taiwanese investors.

At the moment, therefore, the V4 countries should hold more sober and patient expectations from China and they should attempt to attract Chinese investors in the same way as any other – with the promise of economically beneficial and stable investment environment based on the economically sound comparative factors. While the well-functioning diplomatic relations are useful for both political and economic reasons, they are not a recipe for instant growth of financial inflows and exports, not even in the case of China, who may be at the end more interested in “just” having the positive political relations.

5. Conclusion

Numerous theories have emerged on the true nature of the China-CEE cooperation in recent years. Some believe that China nurtures hidden

⁵Interview with MEP Adrian Severin, 27 November 2013, European Parliament, Brussels.

political intentions covered by business cooperation and even tries to divide Europe from the inside. Others say that the 16+1 is a purely economic cooperation fostering investment and trade relations. The truth is probably somewhere in between.

The (in)famous 16+1 platform shall witness in the end of 2014 already its third summit of the heads of the governments. While the first such event took place in Warsaw in 2012 (in the year 2011 there was a business forum organized in Budapest attended by the Chinese Premier), in 2013 the leaders met in Bucharest and in 2014 the venue had been set for Belgrade. The choice of the places, like most of the directions of the platform, had been taken by China itself and this may bring the question whether the V4 is not losing position to the Balkan countries in the Chinese focus on the CEE16. To support this allegation, we have found that with the exception of Sino-Czech relations there has not been any substantial change in the political relations between the V4 and China since 2012. That is mirrored by the lack of clear economic takeoff, although in economic exchange the four countries are still much ahead the rest of the group of CEE16.

Politically the major improvement of the bilateral relations with Poland came in 2011, thus before the official kick-off of the 16+1 platform. Ever since then, Hungary has not experienced any significant increase in their political relations with Beijing and similar thing is truth for Slovakia. Paradoxically, the Czech relations with China witnessed recently the most obvious positive shift since 1989. However, this should be perhaps solely attributed to the change of the government in the country, which has been only welcomed and accepted in Beijing. This may show that China, while being the driving force of the 16+1 platform, does not have any particular scheme for the V4 and neither it planned any political or economic offensive after announcing the Warsaw initiative in 2012.

However, the steady process could have been anticipated and can be understood. Visegrad countries present a special type of actors for China, as they are neither technologically developed nor rich to the level of the major Western European countries, and neither willing (for the most part) to accept risky deals with China, which may be perceived critically in Brussels. Even if they were, it seems China is not interested to support them against the EU, as the development of the relations between Hungary and China show. Furthermore, the historic relations and geographic position may put the V4 in somewhat disadvantaged position vis-a-vis Balkan countries, which seem to be approached as ‘special’ – indeed ‘strategic’ – partners by China (see also Tesa? 2014)

As discussed, the V4 countries follow similar goals defined by the economic expectations in their dealing with China, although the level of

necessity may vary. While it is often presented that they are competitors when it comes to (Chinese) investors, the situation when they would conduct a 'race to the bottom' should be prevented. In fact, the competitive advantages of the four countries (see Éltető and Toporowski 2013) provide space for political deals and common approach in presenting at the more distant places. The resulting effect of the increased amount of good quality investments in the fitting areas could be good reward for compromises required for unified position.

When we are looking for something particular which could provide the V4 countries with a prominent role within the 16+1 cooperation the answer might be the "One Belt, One Road Project", also known as the New Silk Road project of China. All proposed new lines (the Chinese Transcontinental Network and the New Eurasian Land Bridge) would cross Visegrad countries, while already existing railroad tracks are also connecting East and West through the V4. Further research could reveal some common ground, which might provide an opportunity to Budapest, Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw to develop their joint strategy.

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