



## **Russian Warships in Cuba as U.S. Funds Azov Brigade & War Escalates: Author Lev Golinkin Explains**

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**Glenn Greenwald (GG):** Ever since October 7th, there has been a massive amount of attention paid to the US financed and armed war that the Israelis are perpetrating in Gaza, and that's for good reason. We obviously have covered that war to a great extent, including, for example, last night where we devoted almost all of our show to it, and many other times where we have done in the past that war does deserve a lot of attention. It's a war funded, armed, financed and diplomatically enabled by the United States. Obviously, anyone who's an American, an American journalist covering American news, ought to be covering that war extensively. But the other war that the United States is finding funding and financing and arming, which is the NATO war against Russia taking place in Ukraine, is still a war that is not just ongoing, but often getting more and more dangerous. And yet there's not very much attention paid anymore to that war, in part because it's just become so normalised. It's become part of the woodwork of American foreign policy. It's just going to be one of those endless wars that we support indefinitely, in part because Israel has distracted from it, but also because I think there's an effort to ensure there's not much attention paid to the war in Ukraine because it is not a static war. It is getting more and more dangerous. And most importantly and alarmingly of all, it involves rapid escalation between the two countries that, just by the way, have the largest nuclear stockpiles of any country on the planet, which is the United States and Russia, that still operate on archaic and hair trigger systems built during the Cold War with thousands of intercontinental ballistic missiles that are nuclear tipped, aimed at one another's major cities. So obviously, whatever tensions between the US and Russia start to escalate and escalate more and more. That is something also that we should be paying a great deal of attention to. And there's a lot going on in this war that affects US national security and the safety, it's really not an exaggeration to say, of the entire planet and human species. So first of all, today there was a G7 summit meeting where Joe Biden attended with the other six leaders of the G7 countries. You may have seen a video where Biden was yet again looking extremely confused, wandering off, having to be kind of guided and babysat by the other leaders who treat him like basically what he is, which is a fragile grandfather in rapid cognitive decline. And at this G7 meeting, the United States signed a side deal with

Ukraine. Obviously, Ukraine is not part of the G7, but Zelensky was there, and part of why they were there was to get more money from the G7, which they did with another \$50 billion in loan guarantees. But also in order to sign this ten year security agreement with the United States, where the United States is committing now to defending Ukrainian national security for the next ten years.

So here is The Guardian article from today, that describes what it is that happened. You see it on the screen. *Joe Biden says 'democracies can deliver' as G7 agrees to \$50 bn Ukrainian aid deal.* "President hails breakthrough as US and Ukraine also announced 10-year bilateral security agreement". And the article explains, quote, "Joe Biden claimed 'democracies can deliver' as he announced the leaders of the G7 western economies had finally reached an agreement that will mobilise an extra \$50 billion of aid to Ukraine using frozen Russian state assets. Speaking at the G7 summit on Thursday, Biden hailed the breakthrough as he met Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and announced the two countries had also signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement ending 12 months of difficult negotiations. Biden said arrangements were being made to provide Ukraine with five Patriot missile defence systems, saying, quote, 'Everything we have is going to Ukraine until its needs are met'. The Ukrainian leader, President Zelensky described the security guarantee as, quote, 'a very detailed legally binding agreement' that lasts not just for the duration of the war, but afterwards, too. He said the deal covers intelligence cooperation and the strengthening of Ukrainian defence interests". And then here from CNN, added information about this ten year security deal. And think about this, the Ukrainians are right on the other side of the Russian border. Obviously, the Russians regard the Ukrainians as a threat to the national security, in particular Western involvement going back to the 2014 coup that the West engineered to make the democratically elected leader of Ukraine, a victim of a coup, removed before his term ended, because he was, in their view, getting too close to Moscow. And then ever since, increasing levels of US-NATO involvement in that country. And now we're signing a security guarantee with Ukraine, when all Russia really wanted from the start was a guarantee that Ukraine would be a neutral country, a buffer country between Russia and the West. We are drawing them more and more into our sphere, guaranteeing their security, in other words, committing to protecting them if ever they have new wars. Short of what a NATO guarantee is, but on the way.

Here's how CNN explains it. "The United States and Ukraine signed a bilateral security pact on the sidelines of the G7 in Italy on Thursday. The deal lays out a path for the US's longstanding security relationship with Kyiv – but could also be undone by future administrations. The agreement follows months of negotiations between the US and Ukraine. After signing the agreement, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US president Joe Biden made remarks and answered questions. What is included in the deal: The agreement commits the US for ten years to continued training of Ukraine's armed forces, more cooperation in the production of weapons and military equipment, the continued provision of greater intelligence sharing. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Thursday that the bilateral security pact that Ukraine and the United States signed on Thursday will serve as a bridge to Kyiv's attempt to join NATO. 'It states that America supports Ukraine's future

membership in NATO, and recognises that our security agreement is a bridge to Ukraine's membership in NATO', Zelensky said at a news conference with US President Joe Biden". So Zelensky is ensuring the world that the purpose of this ten year security deal is to bring Ukraine into NATO, bring NATO right up to the most sensitive part of the Russian border.

Now all of that is happening at the same time that there is some extraordinary escalation taking place between the United States and Russia. That is a direct response to what the US has been doing in Ukraine, not just the security deal, but also the US announcing that they would allow US provided missiles in Ukraine to be used to attack targets inside Russia. And all you have to do is imagine what would happen if China or Russia shipped arms to Venezuela or Cuba or Mexico and then said, it's not just for your defence, feel free to attack targets inside the United States on American soil. You can imagine how we would react to that. Obviously, Russia is seeing that the same way. And so as a result, this week, according to CNN, Russian ships arrive in Cuba as Cold War allies strengthen their ties. Quote, "The Gorshkov is one of the Russian Navy's most modern ships, and was followed by the nuclear powered submarine Kazan, a rescue tug, and an oil tanker. The four Russian ships are now docked in berths usually occupied by cruise ships. It marks the largest show of force by the Russians with their long standing ally Cuba in many years." As probably most of you know, Cuba is 90 miles off the coast of South Florida. "The US assesses that the Kazan does not have nuclear weapons on board, a US official said. The vessels will carry out a five-day official visit to the Caribbean island – a show of Russian force just 90 miles from Florida" – as I just told you – "as tensions rise between the US and Russia over the war in Ukraine. Pentagon and the State Department officials have also sought to emphasise that the Russian activity is routine and poses no threat to the US, and have noted that Cuba has hosted Russian ships every year between 2013 and 2020. Still, the Russian transit to the region comes at a particularly tense moment between Washington and Moscow, several weeks after President Joe Biden agreed to allow Ukraine to strike inside Russia directly using US provided weapons".

Now this article from Business Insider on June 12th undermines and even negates this attempt by the Biden administration to pretend that this is just a very routine matter of no concern. Quote, *The Russian submarine that just showed up off Cuba is one of a new class of subs that has worried the US and NATO for years.* "Russia's Yasen-class submarines, like the Kazan, are formidable threats within Russia's navy, which have long boasted a rather capable submarine fleet. The subs' newer, more advanced features make them difficult to track, and they are heavily armed and capable of attacks against land- and sea-based targets with little to no warning. These warships carry Oniks and Kalibr cruise missiles and eventually the new Zircon missiles. US officials have said that the appearance of these vessels in the area is not a direct response to those developments or an escalation, noting that Cuba has hosted Russian ships and the Russian exercises are routine. The vessels in this group, however, are among Russia's most advanced or carrying newer weapons. In the past NATO officials have flagged the Yasen-class submarines as, quote, 'one of the big strategic challenges the alliance faces'." So you have the US expanding its role in Ukraine, signing a ten year security deal allowing Ukrainians to use US missiles to attack inside Russia. Russia then sends some of its most

sophisticated submarines, including nuclear capable submarines to Cuba right off the coast of the United States. And now there's a response from the United States.

From ABC news earlier today, quote, *US submarine pulls into Guantanamo Bay a day after Russian warships arrive in Cuba*. Quote, "A US navy submarine has pulled into Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in a show of force as a fleet of Russian warships gather for planned military exercises in the Caribbean". "US Southern Command said the USS Helena, a nuclear powered fast attack submarine, pulled into the waters near the US base in Cuba on Thursday, just a day after a Russian frigate, a nuclear powered submarine, an oil tanker and a rescue tug crossed into Havana Bay after drills in the Atlantic Ocean". Now, obviously, when the US and Russia start playing games with nuclear submarines off the coast of Cuba, that ought to be very alarming to anyone who has even a minimal understanding of Cold War history. Because, again, while I wouldn't equate this to or even put it in the same category, yet, as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis came very close to blowing up the entire world. And although it included the basing of Russian nuclear missiles in Cuba at the request of the Cuban government, many of the factors that almost led to an unintended or miscommunication based nuclear exchange involved Russian submarines in the vicinity of US submarines. That is an incredibly dangerous game to be playing. And it's been so predictable from the start that things like this will happen and there's no explanation about what justifies taking on a risk like this.

Now, at the same time, from CNN yesterday: *The US lifts a ban on sending weapons to Ukraine's Azov brigade*. "The ban, which had been long in place called the 'Leahy Law', prohibits any military assistance or training to be provided to foreign units held responsible for human rights violations, according to the US State Department". And a lot of people have been wondering why that Leahy Law that bans US arms to human rights violators doesn't prohibit the US from sending arms to Israel. But the US government has determined in the past that it does prevent them from sending arms to the Azov battalion. Quote, "The battalion, named the 12th Special Forces Azov Brigade, was integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard in 2023 after the initial formation dissolved. The unit has been praised for its role in the fight against Russian occupation. The unit welcomed the lifting of the ban on receiving security assistance from the US, saying in a statement Tuesday, quote, 'This is a new page in the history of our unit'." In other words, this battalion that has long been described as a very dangerous neo-Nazi force, the dominant strain of fighters inside Ukraine, to the point where the US government had put it on its banned list for any weapons or money going to it, now suddenly they've turned that Azov battalion into heroes who the US is now openly arming and funding. Again, one of the main concerns that Russia said it had with this war is the presence of neo-Nazi units. Obviously, when Russia hears about Nazi or neo-Nazi loyalist right in their region on the other side of the border, given the major trauma that country suffered from the war against Nazis in World War Two, that's something that the Russians are going to take very seriously. So it's a series of escalations all happening at once, resulting in some extremely dangerous moves, including the deployment of nuclear submarines or nuclear capable submarines to Cuba by both countries.

Now, to help us understand all of this, Lev Golinkin is a Ukrainian American journalist and author born in Ukraine. He has always had an important and relevant perspective on the war in Ukraine. He has written some of the most insightful and heterodox and, by the way, informed articles about Ukraine and the war and the US funding of the last two and a half years. He frequently writes for journals like *The Forward* and *the Nation*. He is the author of a book as well, titled *A backpack, A Bear and Eight Crates of Vodka*. We are always happy to have him on our show. It always helps illuminate what's going on in Ukraine. Lev, it's great to see you. Good evening. Thank you for taking the time to join us tonight.

**Lev Golinkin (LG):** Thank you for having me.

**GG:** So let's begin with the last issue that I just discussed, which is the US lifting of this long standing ban on providing arms and funds to the Azov battalion, on the grounds that, as everybody said, for a full decade until February 2022, was an actual neo-Nazi group, a serious menace inside Ukraine. I want to show you, because there was a foreign policy group, Just Foreign Policy, that criticised the government's lifting of this ban. It was, through Erik Sperling, he is with just foreign policy and what he said, we have the tweet on the screen citing the Washington Post article: *U.S. lifts weapons ban on Ukrainian military unit, meaning Azov*. He said, quote, "Azov was barred about a decade ago from using American arms because they determined its founders are racist, xenophobic and ultranationalist". Quote, "We can not ignore our values – we must live up to them", quoting the State Department. And then the State Department responded to him, essentially justifying why this wasn't a contradiction of what they said. They said: "Fact check for you, the US government never provided support to the now disabled militia known as the Azov battalion. In contrast, the 12th Special Forces Azov Brigade received arms and equipment after successfully completing necessary security forces vetting". And they say: "Two key takeaways: The two units are not the same, despite persistent Russian disinformation to conflate them. And we are living up to our values". So what they're saying, Lev, as you know, is: Look, there was this thing called the Azov battalion. We warned it was a neo-Nazi, dangerous group for over a decade, but now it rebranded. It's called the Azov Brigade, a totally different organisation that is fully consistent with our principles and our values. And that's why we can arm it. But what do you make of that defence?

**LG:** It's getting to the point where North Korea would be embarrassed to have the kind of propaganda as the State Department has. Because don't take Lev Golinkin's word for it. Don't take Glenn Greenwald's. Azov itself just celebrated their ten year anniversary from the founding of the original 2014 battalion. Okay, the government of Kyiv, the Government of Ukraine also celebrated their founding. So, according to the State Department, Azov itself is now part of the Kremlin propaganda, the group that Azov itself admits that it is the same thing as the 2014 battalion. So the State Department is now lying at the point at which even Azov is not descending to, and this is the same institution that's telling us to care about disinformation, to care about truth and facts. And they're lying at a point where even, like I said, even Azov itself admits that they're the same thing.

**GG:** And of course, in US liberal discourse and US discourse generally, obviously, the worst thing you could possibly be or be called is a Nazi. People are frequently called Nazis inside the United States for having conservative views. Then they kind of meet the real deal Nazis, like the ones with Nazi collaborators as heroes on their wall like Stepan Bandera and all kinds of Nazi insignia that the Azov battalion and brigade have been caught wearing. Its leaders still openly do those sorts of things. So let's show the tweets that you were referring to by Azov. So as we mentioned, the Twitter feed of what was the Azov Battalion is now rebranded the Azov Brigade, which the US government says we can arm because it's a brand new, fully vetted, organisation that has nothing to do with the prior one called the Azov Battalion. Yet, as you say, we have this put on the screen from the Azov Brigade: *Asov 10-years*. They're celebrating their ten year anniversary, which is very strange for a group that was just newly created. Quote, "This is the path from a few dozen volunteers who had only motivation and faith and justice to a special purpose brigade, one of the most effective units of the Defence Force". It celebrates all the places that they have been fighting in. "The past was not easy. We have someone to honour. There is someone to remember, but there is no time to fold our hands". So here you have them saying no, we're not new. We've been in existence for ten years, meaning going back to when they were included as Nazis. And then we have another tweet. And again, it's so bizarre because they call themselves now the Asov Brigade to give this impression, but they're very open about the fact that they're not a new group at all. You see this tweet from this week: *History of the Brigade*. "The quote 'Azov' Battalion was established on May 5th, 2014 as a battalion of the special purpose police patrol service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, based on the decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine". So they're calling themselves the Azov Battalion and saying, we have a long ten year history that is exactly the same as the Azov Battalion that the US government is now denying it's actually arming and funding. I mean, it's just hard to comprehend this kind of North Korean propaganda, as you said.

**LG:** The only reason why it's called a brigade instead of a battalion is because it grew from a battalion to a regiment into a brigade. That's the only thing. It's the same thing. It just reflects the size of the men in there, the size of the unit. That is it. And it's amazing how they're just ready, the State Department, to tell you that white is black and black is white. Even Azov denies it. And I think we talked before about it, but also the Washington Post and Western media are also just telling lies about how they are under a new leadership. And again, it is just easy to disprove it.

**GG:** So I guess, you know, if you're somebody who believes that this Russian invasion of Ukraine is not just, ethically and legally indefensible, but also some grave threat to all things decent like Western security and Western freedom. I suppose an American citizen might say, Look, I don't care who I'm arming as long as there are effective fighters against Russia. We saw a lot of that in Syria, where the United States was actually fighting alongside of and eventually arming al-Qaida and even some battalions from ISIS. And the argument was, look, we have the same goal, which is to topple Bashar al Assad, and we'll fund whoever we need to fund in order to help with our war objectives. What about that argument like, look, who

cares what Azov's ideology is as long as they're helping in our security interest, in our security objectives, we should fund whoever we want?

**LG:** The problem is that the Biden administration and pretty much the Western establishment for the past six or seven years has created this paradigm of we are on the brink between democracy and fascism. We are on the brink between truth and disinformation, between facts and lies. This is what we are facing. We are not arming Ukraine to fight Russia. Where arming Ukraine to protect democracy, to protect freedom, to protect democratic values. And Joe Biden said that the impetus for running for president was after he watched the Nazis march in Charlottesville, Virginia. That's the story that he's giving out. That is what forced him to run for president. That is the impetus for it. That's what inspired him. You are having this entire narrative of we are fighting fascism and we are fighting lies, and then you just take this and you completely subvert it and you say, just kidding, because when it comes to Ukraine, we will take care of this, we'll work with neo-Nazis, we'll arm them, they're our friends. And I just want you to pause for a second and just think like, imagine you're part of the Pentagon or the White House team, okay? And you're like, you know what, there's just one brigade here. This is one brigade who is known for being neo-Nazi. Why do we have to arm them? Why can't we just arm everybody else? Why do this? Why mess with them? Well, perhaps, you know what? We're going to arm them. So you know what? Why don't we say, hey, you guys, you have to at least change your symbol, the neo-Nazi symbol that you use you have to at least change it.

**GG:** Maybe a condition for arming them could be that they no longer use neo-Nazi insignia, that they are no longer revered and treated as heroes. People who collaborated with, you know, massacres of Jews inside Ukraine like Stepan Bandera, like, maybe they could at least make those kinds of symbolic concessions, but we don't even demand those.

**LG:** They are not even giving the most idiotic, simple, meaningless things, even that they're not even trying. That is what kind of baffles me. I think it's the big lie notion, that Joseph Goebbels said, that if you're going to lie, make it as big and proud as possible. And that's what they're doing. They're leaning in, I guess, as the term today goes. Because they could have just asked for a couple of simple little things. Take a picture of their leaders holding the white fragility book. Do at least something to try, but they're not even trying. And you have the Washington Post saying that Azov is under new leadership. And in the Washington Post article, the Washington Post quotes a man who is the deputy commander of Azov who's been there since its inception. I mean, it's not only that. Who is this person who is now the deputy commander of Azov? He goes back to the neo-Nazi gang that founded Azov in the first place. But go ahead, Glenn.

**GG:** So I just want to insert here because, you know, this is an area that has a very long and rich history, obviously, Ukraine and Russia and this whole region. And, you know, a lot of times I think Americans don't look at things from the perspective of other countries. So I remember, we interviewed Sahra Wagenknecht, she was a long time left-wing leader in Germany who has really split with her longtime party over several things, but principally the German, not only funding but provision of tanks to Ukraine. And what she was saying was,

and I think it is something that a German would think about, or a Russian, but not necessarily people in the United States was, do you know how traumatic it is for Russia? How strong the reaction would have to be to see German tanks rolling eastward toward Russia through Ukraine? And she was talking about, you know, what are we doing in risking this kind of extreme Russian reaction? Now, the other part of that that I want to ask you about is this existence of Nazi-ism inside Ukraine, because when Putin first announced the invasion and explained why, and he was doing so before, he was talking about the eradication of Nazi-ism on the other side of the Russian border, immediately people said that was false, that that was Russian disinformation. But of course, there are actual neo-Nazi groups inside Ukraine. They are among the most armed and well trained and dangerous fighters. And we've said that for a long time, until it was banned to say it in February 2022. So looking at it from the Russian perspective, now that the United States is doing things like lifting the restrictions on using American missiles to strike inside Russia, lifting the restriction on arming and banning Azov, how do you think the Russians are, whether they're right or wrong, but how do you think they're interpreting those kind of moves?

**LG:** From the from the inception, I mean, if you look at the history and also thank you for considering the history from a different point of view, I think it's so important, but Putin needs to hold Russia together because it is a giant multi-ethnic country and it needs to have an idea uniting it. Okay, so one of the biggest things is the legacy of World War Two. That's what he has seized on, of Russia is part of a Soviet Union fighting back against Nazis. Okay. And that is something that speaks. And this is the part that we forget so much that millions of Ukrainians died fighting against the Nazis. So when we say that Ukraine celebrates Stepan Bandera and Ukraine celebrates Nazi collaborators, it's wrong. It's not Ukraine. It's this western part of Ukraine that has hijacked the country and is now running it and imposing its own will upon the country. Saying that Ukraine loves Nazi's and worships Nazis, that is the same thing as saying that America, everybody in America, loves Stonewall Jackson and Robert E Lee and the Ku Klux Klan, you know, it's just a denial of reality. But for Russia, Putin needed something to unite the country. And in the Russian spirit, in the Russian mindset, one of the things that really encourages people and fires people up is the notion of everybody's against us, so if we have our back to the wall. So certainly the images of tanks, German tanks, flowing across Ukraine to Russia, certainly the notion of the West combining and this being a war of NATO on Russia that is helping get the support for the war because Russia is suffering a lot of losses as well.

**GG:** Well, let me ask you though then, about the war itself, the battlefield itself, what's actually happening in the war. From the very beginning, there was a big doubt about how Ukraine could possibly win, especially given the way NATO and the United States defined victory, which was the expulsion of every last Russian troop from every inch of Ukrainian soil, including Crimea. It was a maximalist version of victory that seemed to be a pipe dream at best, and a very dangerous goal, more accurately. For a while, including when we were talking, the war was kind of frozen. It was sort of stagnant. The frontline wasn't moving. Lately, though, it's pretty clear that the Russians have some kind of an upper hand. They've been advancing. The Ukrainian front lines are starting to crumble. What do you make of



where this war is and where it could possibly go? Because on the one hand, you have the Russians saying we will never accept, obviously, they're not going to ever give up Crimea, and unless Ukraine becomes neutral when they're going in the opposite direction, we'll never accept leaving the eastern province of the Donbass and those other provinces, whereas NATO and the US says we will never accept anything other than a full Russian withdraw from Ukraine. Where is the war, in your view, and what possible ending could it have in the near future?

**LG:** Well, the biggest problem with Ukraine, it's not the weapons, it's the people who hold the weapons because they're running out of men. And the average age is something like 43 of the fighters there. And there's stories of them, there's videos everyday coming out, of press gangs rolling through Ukraine, snatching men off the streets and just throwing them in vans and off to the front lines. So, as always, when you say, what do Ukrainians look at for this war, you have to say which Ukrainians? I mean, Lindsey Graham is saying Ukraine wants to fight to the last men. And meanwhile we have videos of men in Ukraine doing everything possible, physically resisting being sent into the armed forces. So it's two completely different things. And what you have is Russia has the advantage of time because they just have more men to die, and the more Ukraine pushes, eventually it is just going to be a question of who Zelensky is going to fight with. And this brings us to our most dangerous point, because we are now talking about France and the Baltic states sending in advisers and troops into Ukraine. And that is getting us into a very dangerous World War Three point, because we're going to have now a situation in which when Russia is going to be firing on Ukraine, there's going to be Western troops involved on the ground. That is, I think, one of the most dangerous things imaginable there. And to me, another thing that's comparable to this, is the fact that you mentioned the Cuban Missile crisis, 1962. So the difference between the Cuban Missile Crisis and now is that the Cuban Missile Crisis was run by adults, as Steve Cohen, as my mentor, Steve Cohen would always talk about it, he would say that Kennedy asked for dissenting opinions for what are all the options? What are we going to do? And throughout the Cold War, it was run by people, even when things were very, very tense, there were still people who were running the war on both sides, who were adults and who understood that we do not want to burn ourselves to a nuclear crisp, and that is absent. The war is now being run by people who are like, oh, you're too chicken. I mean, it's being run by the Lindsey Graham's of this world. And that is a terrifying thing because these people are dangerous. And what they're doing is the more men the Ukraine loses, the more men are going to pour in from other Western countries. And what happens then? We don't know.

**GG:** Yeah, absolutely. It's always great to speak to you. It's actually refreshing to hear from people who actually have an understanding of Ukraine, who have an understanding of the region. It's so notable how rarely the corporate media includes people who both have an expertise of the region and who have a different view than US and NATO foreign policy, and the narrative that they insist upon in order to keep that war going. That's, I think, why independent media exist. And we are always thrilled to talk to you. Hope you stay well. Thanks so much for taking the time to meet.

**LG:** Thank you so much, Glenn.

**GG:** Thanks for watching this clip from System Update, our live show that airs every Monday through Friday at 7 p.m. eastern exclusively on Rumble. You can catch the full nightly shows live or view the backlog of episodes for free on our Rumble page. You can also find full episodes the morning after they air across all major podcasting platforms, including Spotify and Apple. All the information you need is linked below. We hope to see you there.

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