

**THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT THROUGH THE LENS
OF THE INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW**

Abstract:	<p><i>Throughout history, especially after the Cold-War period, the Russian Federation manifested itself as a global power, engaging in many aggressive forms of warfare, ranging from conventional, to hybrid and informational. An important requirement in order to fully comprehend the legal consequences of their actions is to understand and analyze the international legal aspects, especially the International Humanitarian Law. This paper supports this initiative by raising awareness of all society members regarding the modus operandi of aggressive states that violate the International Humanitarian Law and the solutions provided by international conventions, such as the Geneva Conventions, international norms and customs.</i></p> <p><i>Methodologically, the qualitative research was integrated through the use of document analysis and a case study: the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The paper also presents the key differences between international human rights and international humanitarian law, a distinction which is often times confused by society at large. The evolution of international legislation regarding human rights and international humanitarian law is another aspect investigated in the study. In the end, the most important factor for protecting the civilian population is their knowledge of international legislation, as the key to halt all armed conflicts lies often in the societies' initiative and their proactive actions.</i></p>
Keywords:	the Russian Federation; Russian-Ukrainian conflict; International Humanitarian Law; Geneva Conventions; human rights; armed conflicts
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Introduction

The current regional instability, as an aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, clearly shows signs of further evolution and creates panic among the civilian European population regarding a leading attack emerging from the Eastern side of the continent.

The current paper's objective is to determine whether the Russian Federation should be held responsible for the violation of international humanitarian rights, and if it is, what international crime is committed. Although mass media plays a major role in portraying the Russian forces as criminals, it is of utmost importance for society to be aware of the international laws and carefully analyze them, in order to make a point worth noting. The objective of identifying the responsibility of the Russian Federation in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict comes from a legal analysis point of view, not from a propagandistic or skeptical mindset, therefore making the results of the research as objective as possible. The methods used in the research are qualitative ones, document analysis and case studies.

To deepen the subject of international responsibility, we must first conceptualize the basic terms that we will use during this study. Initially, there existed the presumption of the right to conduct war - "jus ad bellum" – which evolved into "jus in bello" – the series of norms that govern relations between armed conflict parties.

The codification of International Humanitarian Law has resulted in the theoretical separation of "jus in bello" into two branches: war law and humanitarian law. The Law of War can be found in The Hague, 1899¹ and 1907² – under the heading "rules and customs of war". Going forward, the 1949 Geneva Conventions³ makes a sharper separation between laws of war (Hague law) and humanitarian law (Geneva Law). The Geneva Additional Protocols of 1977 introduce a new concept: "international law applicable in armed conflicts"⁴.

International Humanitarian Law is a combination of customary and unconventional international law norms aimed at resolving issues that arise in instances of international or non-international conflict. Armed conflict is a state of miscommunication, disagreement, or clashing of antagonistic interests between

¹*Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 29 July 1899*, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/150>, (24.05.2022)

²*Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907*, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/195>, (24.05.2022)

³ International Committee of the Red Cross, *Geneva convention for the amelioration of the condition of the wounded and sick in armed forces*, 12 August 1949, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-0173.pdf>, (24.05.2022)

⁴*Protocols I and II additional to the Geneva Conventions*, 8 June 1977, art. 2, letter b), <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/additional-protocols-1977.htm>, (24.05.2022)

opposing parties that have devolved into violent actions or war owing to particular circumstances.

In the event of armed conflict, the International Humanitarian Law applies regardless of whether a declaration of war has been issued or whether the state of war has been acknowledged by the parties to the conflict.

International legislation

Efforts to enforce laws prohibiting war

Prior to the outlawing of wars of aggression, war was:

-a relationship between states, with only those nations having “jus ad bellum” (the right to wage war);

-a relationship dictated by the intention to wage war (“animus bellandi”), with the obligation to warn the opponent in advance by declaring war or issuing an ultimatum.

The first effort to prohibit aggressive behavior, at an international level, was made by the League of Nations, with its Treaty of Mutual Assistance¹. The document was signed in 1923 and it determined that aggression, in a state-to-state relationship, is an international crime. The 1928 Briand-Kellogg Pact was the first legal instrument to prohibit war. Article II it stated that “the settlement or solution of all disputes or conflicts of whatever nature or of whatever origin they may be, which may arise among them, shall never be sought except by pacific means”².

Following the First World War, the League of Nations Pact was signed in 1919. It is worth noting that the Pact did not outright forbid war or the use of force; rather, it provided a system for limiting conflict to acceptable levels. When analyzing its content, an algorithm for solving the causes can be observed: “Any war or threat of war, (...) is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League. (...) In case any such emergency should arise the Secretary General shall summon a meeting of the Council on the request of any Member”³.

“The Members of the League agree (...) in no case to resort to war until three months after the award by the arbitrators or the judicial decision, or the report by the Council”⁴. (...) If such efforts are successful, a statement shall be made public giving such facts and explanations regarding the dispute and the terms of the settlement. (...) If the dispute is not thus settled, the Council either unanimously or by a majority vote shall make or publish a report containing (...) recommendations which are deemed just and proper”⁵.

¹ League of Nations, *Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance*, 27 September 1923

² *General treaty for the renunciation of war (Kellogg-Briand Pact)*, Paris, 27 August 1928, <https://iilj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/General-Treaty-for-the-Renunciation-of-War-Kellogg-Briand-Pact.pdf>, (24.05.2022)

³ League of Nations, *Covenant of the League of Nations*, 28 April 1919, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3dd8b9854.html>, (24.05.2022)

⁴ *Ibidem*, art. 12

⁵ *Ibidem*, art. 15

Following the Second World War, the issue seemed more pressing; therefore, The United Nations Charter was signed in 1945. The text clearly stated a no-war policy for the signatory countries, prohibiting wars of aggression, which is the most serious international crime. “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”¹.

However, for it not to become an undesirable agreement for some frozen conflict regions, the Charter offered an exception to the rule – the right to use armed forces only for the exercise of the law of the legitimate right of individual or collective defense, or for the sanctioning of aggression: “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations”². After the prohibition of aggression war, based on the 1945 UN Charter³ and the 1928 General Treaty of Renunciation of War⁴, governments no longer have “jus ad bellum” or “facultas bellandi” – anybody who employs force is labeled an aggressor by a Security Council resolution and faces the consequences, according to international legislation.

International law on human rights

The draft article on state accountability, drawn up by the UN Commission on International Law (1996), defines international crime as "an internationally wrongful act which results from the breach by a State of an international obligation essential for the protection of fundamental interests of the international community"⁵.

In Article 6 of the Statute of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, the first categorization of international crimes was established⁶, mentioning three instances: crimes against peace, against humanity and war crimes.

Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions significantly broadens the definition of war crime, including all major violations listed in the Geneva Law of August 12,

¹ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, 24 October 1945, 1 UNTS XVI, art. 2(3), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3930.html>, (24.05.2022)

² *Ibidem*, art. 51

³ United Nations, *Op. cit.*

⁴ *General treaty for the renunciation of war (Kellogg-Briand Pact)*, Paris, 27 August 1928, <https://iilj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/General-Treaty-for-the-Renunciation-of-War-Kellogg-Briand-Pact.pdf>, (24.05.2022)

⁵ UN Commission on International Law, *Draft article on state responsibility with commentaries*, January 1997, art. 19(2), https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/9_6_1996.pdf, (24.05.2022)

⁶ Adunarea Generală a Organizației Națiunilor Unite, *Convenția asupra imprescriptibilității crimelor de război și a crimelor contra umanității*, 26 noiembrie 1968, <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/27199>, (24.05.2022)

1949, in Article 85¹. The Protocol also establishes guidelines for a superior's criminal or disciplinary culpability for major violations committed by subordinates². Superiors must answer if they knew or had the opportunity to know, in certain circumstances, that a subordinate had committed or would commit such a violation, and if they had not taken all reasonable means to prevent or punish such a violation.

The Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, enacted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1948, was the first international legal treaty to criminalize genocide. Even attempted genocide is punishable under this constitution³. This crime can occur during both peace and conflict.

In Article 6, genocide is defined as:

"Any of the acts listed below, committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, namely:

- a) killing members of the group;
- b) serious harm to the physical or mental integrity of members of the group;
- c) the intentional submission of the group to conditions of existence that would lead to its total or partial physical destruction;
- d) birth-prevention methods inside the group;
- e) forcible transfers of children from one group to another"⁴.

The International Criminal Court's Statute, enacted in Rome in 1998, contains the most recent classification of international crimes. As a result, the Statute restricts the Court's jurisdiction to the most serious crimes impacting the international community as a whole. These are the following⁵:

- a) genocide;
- b) crimes against humanity;
- c) war crimes;
- d) aggression crimes.

According to the International Criminal Court's Statute, the following fall under the war crimes incrimination⁶:

- a) "the act of purposely causing considerable anguish or seriously harming bodily integrity or health;
- b) torture and cruel treatment, including biological encounters;

¹ *Protocolul I adițional la Convențiile de la Geneva din 12 august 1949 privind protecția victimelor conflictelor armate internaționale*, 1977, <https://crucearosie.ro/assets/Uploads/Protocolul-Adițional-I.pdf>, (24.05.2022)

² *Ibidem*, art. 86(2)

³ Adunarea Generală a Națiunilor Unite, *Convenția pentru prevenirea și reprimarea crimei de genocid*, 9 decembrie 1948, art. 3, https://irido.ro/irido/pdf/089_ro.pdf, (24.05.2022)

⁴ *Ibidem*, art. 6

⁵ Curtea Penală Internațională, *Statutul Curții Penale Internaționale*, 17 iulie 1998, art. 5(1), <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/759f54/pdf/>, (24.05.2022)

⁶ *Ibidem*, art. 8

- c) the act of forcing a prisoner of war or a protected person to serve in the forces of an enemy power;
- d) intentional deprivation of a prisoner of war or any other person protected by his or her right to a fair and impartial trial;
- e) illegal deportation and transfer or illegal detention;
- f) taking hostages;
- g) destruction and misappropriation of goods not justified by military necessity and carried out on a large scale illicitly and arbitrarily.”

To achieve this paper’s objective, a comparison between war crimes and crimes against humanity was analyzed, revealing some distinctions, based on objective criteria: regarding the specific situation, in times of armed conflict war crimes are implemented; regarding the target population, war crimes target both military and civilian personnel; regarding the limitations, war crimes are strictly limited to actions conducted towards the peoples of the enemy.

The historical evolution of international norms and customs

Historically, norms of war have evolved into customary International Humanitarian Law since the 19th century. For example, written in 1864, the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded Soldiers of the Armed Forces in the Field was amended in 1906 and 1929, and superseded in 1949 by the Geneva Convention (I).

Another example is the 1899 Hague document¹, which expanded to The Hague 1907²; it was later rebirth as the Geneva Convention (II) 1949.

Convention IV on the Laws and Habits of Land Warfare (including the Annex Regulations) is adopted in 1907 at The Hague; the Martens clause is also introduced.

In 1929, in Geneva, the first two Conventions (from 1864 and 1907) are developed and reinforced, and a new agreement on the treatment of prisoners of war is approved, which is later superseded by the Third Geneva Convention (1949)³.

¹ *Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 29 July 1899.* <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/150>, (24.05.2022)

² *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907.* <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/195>, (24.05.2022)

³ *Geneva convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war, 12 August 1949,* https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.32_GC-III-EN.pdf, (24.05.2022)

The four Geneva Conventions, have also been reinforced, through additional protocols in 1977 (Additional Protocols I and II)¹ and 2005 (additional Protocol III)².

On the other hand, international customs are the oldest and most independent source of humanitarian law.

Their practices were developed through time in state-to-state interactions, some connected to traditions, others to ethics or etiquette, and many of which are now codified in international instruments, such as treaties. The major source of International Humanitarian Law is the international treaty, which represents the legal act reflecting a willful agreement between states and other international law subjects to create, amend, or terminate rights and duties in their relations.

The international treaty has a few advantages over the customary norm, such as taking a shorter time to be implemented and making its content less interpretable.

Distinctions between the international human rights and international humanitarian law

Although these are two separate legal systems, international human rights law is strongly tied to International Humanitarian Law. International Humanitarian Law provides protection in exceptional circumstances, such as during armed war, when the majority of human rights are restricted, whereas the international human rights law only comes into action in peace times. Therefore, International Humanitarian Law is in charge of both hostile and non-hostile militants and civilian interactions. Humanitarian law is inextricably related to refugee rights, which exist both in times of peace and in times of conflict. Closely connected is the environmental law, which forbids or regulates the use of any means or practices, designed to affect or degrade the environment from the standpoint of environmental protection and raising community concerns.

The International Humanitarian Law principles are personal inviolability and security, protection of war victims and the civil population, neutrality of humanitarian assistance, good faith, military need and limitation of means and methods of control, discrimination, and proportionality distinction. An entity participating in the government's legal contracts and subject to the principles and rules of International Humanitarian Law is the subject of international law applicable in armed conflict in the legal sense. The capacity of the holder of international rights and duties in the realm of military conflicts, conduct, and

¹ *Protocols I and II additional to the Geneva Conventions*, 8 June 1977, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/additional-protocols-1977.htm>, (24.05.2022)

² *Protocol additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Adoption of an Additional Distinctive Emblem (Protocol III)*, 8 December 2005, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/615>, (24.05.2022)

cessation of hostilities is the most important element of International Humanitarian Law topics.

Following the ratification of the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, and the Additional Protocols of 1977, the Romanian government committed to publicizing the provisions of these international documents, which make up International Humanitarian Law and protect the rights of wounded soldiers, prisoners, and civilians during armed conflict. International Humanitarian Law is an essential aspect of public international law, and it comprises regulations that are meant to protect those who do not or no longer participate in hostilities, as well as to limit the means and tactics of combat employed during armed conflicts.

The ICRC¹ defines international humanitarian law applicable to armed conflict as a set of international rules derived from treaties or customs that are specifically intended to resolve humanitarian issues arising directly from an armed conflict, whether international or non-international in nature; for humanitarian reasons, these rules limit the parties' right to use any means or methods of war that affect civilians.

International Humanitarian Law is divided into two branches. On one hand, the Geneva Conventions are designed to protect the population who are not involved in warfare, as well as those who are not actively involved in hostilities. The Hague Convention, sometimes known as the Law of War, provides the rights and responsibilities of belligerents in the conduct of military operations and places restrictions on the methods of damaging the adversary². However, both branches of the International Humanitarian Law are not fully independent, as parts of the rules of law in The Hague protect victims of war, and some of the norms of law in Geneva limit belligerents' conduct. This difference has primarily historical and didactic importance because the 1977 Additional Protocols were adopted, which combined both branches of the International Humanitarian Law.

Case study – the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

From classical warfare to hybrid warfare, the norms of combat have evolved. International law does not expressly outlaw this new kind of warfare. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a physical embodiment of the hybrid war. As a result, the state lost part of its territory, which was annexed by Russia via a referendum. Unfortunately, the essential steps to stop the Russian Federation's actions have not been implemented, and the Russian aggression on Ukrainian land now poses a threat to regional and European security.

Being a signatory of the Conventions and on all the international treaties mentioned that legally condone armed conflicts, the Russian Federation is a state which should be held responsible for the genocides it caused in East Europe. As a method to achieve this paper's objective of identifying the legal responsibility of

¹ The International Committee of the Red Cross, *What_is_IHL?*, 2004, pp. 1-2, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/what_is_ihl.pdf, (24.05.2022)

² *Ibidem*, pp. 1-2

the Russian Federation in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, we have analyzed the clash between the two states historically.

The 2014 Crimean Peninsula annexation

In 2014, the Russian Federation seized the Crimean Peninsula¹. At the start of the crisis, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich halted all trade and association discussions with the EU. Protests erupted in Kyiv's Independence Square as a result². In late 2013, President Yanukovich met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss strategic collaboration. Anti-government protests became violent between December 2013 and February 2014³.

The President of Ukraine signed a peace accord negotiated by the EU in late February 2014⁴, which includes preparations for a presidential election by the end of the year. The Ukrainian parliament decided to remove President Yanukovich the next day, and he departed the country.

On the Ukrainian peninsula, dozens of pro-Russian militants were occupying government facilities and hoisting the Russian flag. At the same time, the State Duma accepted President Putin's request to deploy the Russian army to Ukraine on March 1, 2014⁵.

In the end, on March 21, 2014, President Putin signed an act formalizing the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea following a sham referendum.

Current development of the conflict

In November 2021, President Zelensky stated that around 100,000 Russian soldiers were mobilized on the Ukrainian border⁶. Russia has drafted a list of security demands to "resolve" the situation in Ukraine, including a formal guarantee that Ukraine will never be admitted to NATO and that NATO would suspend all military activities in Eastern Europe. Following the largest Russian military drill since the Cold War, which included joint exercises with Belarus, the President of the Russian Federation acknowledged the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic on

¹ Nigel Walker, *Ukraine crisis: A timeline (2014 - present)*, Research Briefing Number CBP 9476, UK, House of Commons Library, 1 April 2022, p.6

² Anton Bebler, *Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict*, "Romanian Journal of European Affairs" 15, 2015, pp.35-54

³ Jan Matzek, *Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation*, "Policy Paper", Institut Pro Politiku a Spolecnost, January 2016

⁴ European Union, *Latest analyses of Russia's war on Ukraine*, Briefing, 21 March 2022, p.1

⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace, *The Ukraine Russia Crisis: Terrorism Briefing*, Sydney, March 2022, pp.1-6, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>, (24.05.2022)

⁶ Government Offices of Sweden, *Deterioration of the security environment – implications for Sweden*, 13 May 2022, pp.4-17, <https://www.government.se/legal-documents/2022/05/ds-20228/>, (24.05.2022)

February 21, 2022. Later, Russian forces were dispatched to both districts for "peacekeeping"¹.

The OSCE's special reports on the situation in conflict-affected regions provide illustrative instances of the impact that Russian forces are now projecting on the Ukrainian population.

There were 2158 ceasefire breaches, 1100 explosions in the Donetsk area on February 18-20, and 1073 ceasefire violations, 926 explosions in the Lugansk region.²

On March 3, 2022, Ukraine invoked the Moscow Mechanism of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Human Dimension with the assent of 45 member states. Therefore, on March 14, 2022, three specialists were assigned on a mission required by the Moscow Mechanism to draft a report in three weeks and submit it to Ukraine on April 5, 2022.

The purpose of the report was to determine the impact of the present war on human rights abuses. The OSCE has discovered evidence that such concerns exist even at the level of the most basic rights, such as the right to life, the prohibition of torture, and others, while not being able to verify all alleged occurrences involving violations of International Human Rights Law³.

Other claimed OSCE-related occurrences occurred in February 2022, when Russian tank columns were seen entering the Lugansk region of eastern Ukraine⁴. Despite the Organization's claim that it had vacated its automobile fleet prior to these discoveries, the columns were led by white cars with OSCE insignia. The cars belonged to the Russian Federation, according to the European press, but the OSCE insignia were illegal⁵. The incident occurred just days after Russian officials accused the OSCE of giving Ukraine inside information about Russian forces⁶.

Research results

The results of this study show that the toll of civilians killed, left without homes, and forced to migrate, alongside the use of chemical weapons, although not

¹ Nigel Walker, *Op.cit*, p.27

² OSCE, *Daily Report 40/2022*, Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 21 February 2022, p.1, <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/512683>, (24.05.2022)

³ OSCE, *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Number 132, 13 April 2022, pp.1-2

⁴ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict*, "Center for Strategic & International Studies", 22 April 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>, (24.05.2022)

⁵ Digital Forensic Research Lab, *Russian Hybrid War Report: Belarus joins conflict against Ukraine*, New Atlanticist, 24 February 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-hybrid-war-report-belarus-joins-conflict-against-ukraine/>, (24.05.2022)

⁶ Hugo Meijer, Marco Wyss, *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*, London, Oxford University Press, 2018, p.420

recognized by the Russian Federation¹, clearly define their actions as international crimes. Specifically, the country should be held responsible for the genocide produced in the region, as well as for the emerging refugee crisis.

As a result, unlike the war on terrorism², which is a confrontation between a state and a transnational organization, the two actors in conflict are two states, and the international treaties and conventions have established transparent and fixed algorithms which end in supporting the consequences by the accountable one.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the OSCE's contribution to regional security is distinct and visible. Its holistic approach to security and stability, which includes components of human rights as well as the political, military, economic, and environmental elements of security, is one of its distinctive traits and competitive advantages.

The extensive attack on Ukraine by Russian President Vladimir Putin is a flagrant breach of International Humanitarian Law and the United Nations Charter, endangering European and global peace and security. Fortunately, the 45 participating governments, including the 27 signatory EU member states, can take action against the Russian Federation for gross human rights breaches³ and the humanitarian consequences of the conflict thanks to the Moscow OSCE Mechanism.

The objective of the paper was achieved, with research results showing that the most serious international crime that the Russian Federation should be held accountable for is genocide. Although their true interest lies in internal official documents, the deeper skirmish into Europe, following the 2014 Crimea Peninsula annexation, has raised many concerns regarding humanitarian crises and forced displacements, as well as their attempt to wipe the Ukrainian blood-line off the face of the Earth, with an all-out-war.

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³ Statista Research Department, *Russia-Ukraine conflict 2021-2022 - statistics & facts*, 17 May 2022, https://www.statista.com/topics/8922/russia-ukraine-conflict-2021-2022/#topicHeader__wrapper, (24.05.2022)

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