

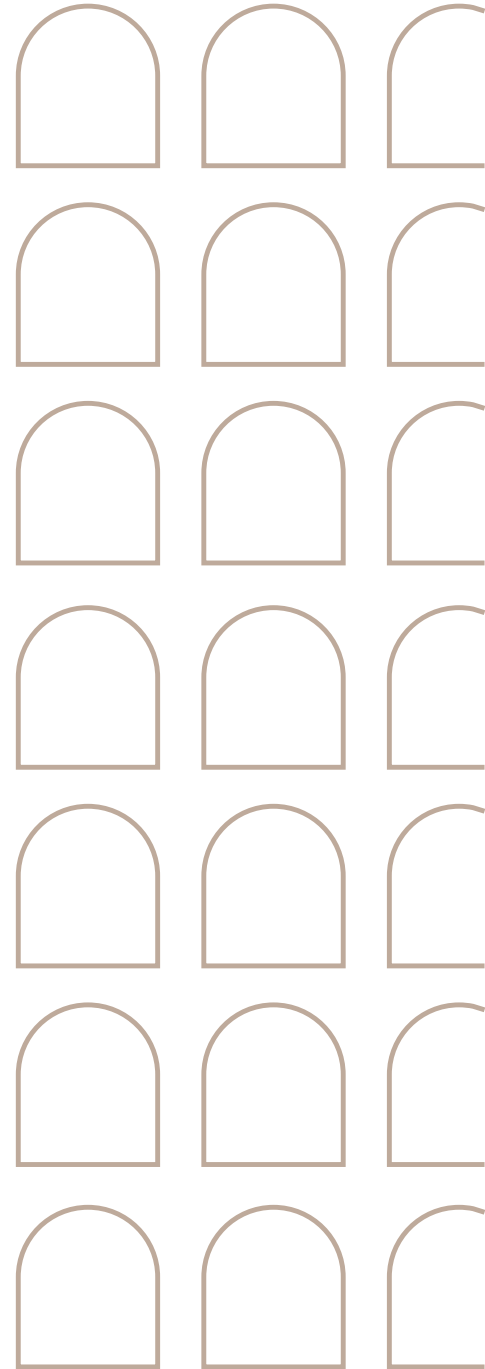
STG Policy Papers

# POLICY BRIEF

## HOW WE SEE THE WORLD: THE USE OF MAPS IN TRANSNATIONAL POLICY

**Authors:**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

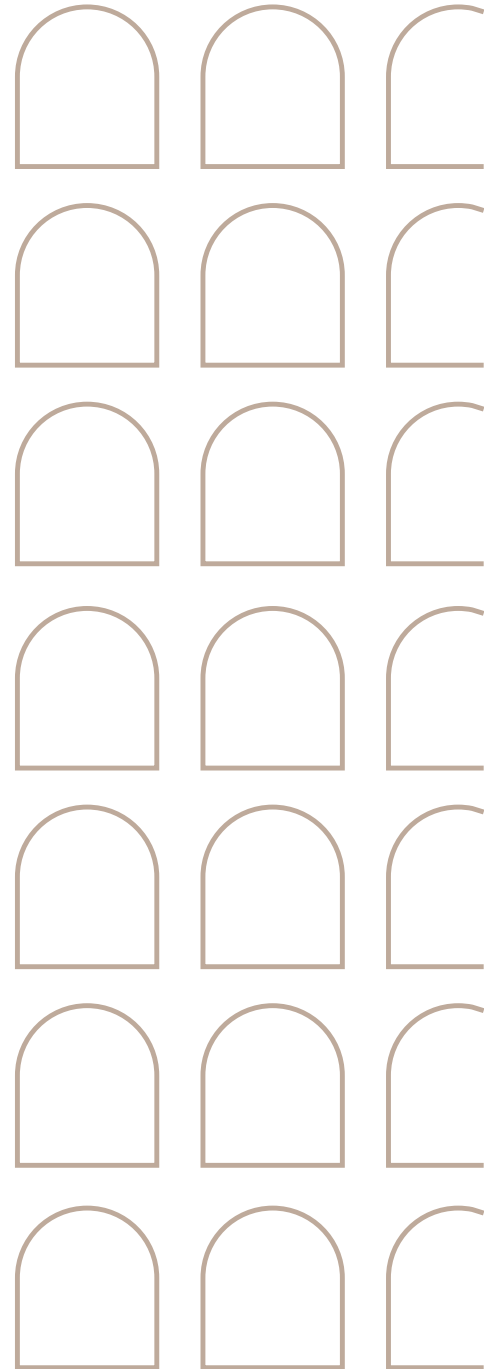
We are conscious of the fact that the debate on the appropriateness of certain representations of the world, as used by international agencies to communicate their purpose, and mission is long and complex. This brief did not set out to give definitive answers. Rather, in the spirit of decolonial studies, it aims to propose new questions and points of view on the topic, encouraging intentionality in visual communication.

The brief aims to contribute to the current debate on decolonial policy making. Taking as a reference framework the Colonial Matrix of Power ([Quijano, 2000](#)), the brief outlines that choices related to visual communication have the power to convey messages on how development agencies position themselves in relation to decolonization and to coloniality. It continues with the analysis of how international agencies working in development, use visual representations of the world, such as maps and globes, to communicate their vision, mission, and strategy. It concludes by proposing actions and recommendations.

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## 1. DECOLONIALITY: A FRAMEWORK

In the second half of the 20th century, while many people in the world were setting themselves free from the colonial yoke, several scholars and intellectuals recognising the need for physical rebellion and pushback when seeking freedom from colonialism, began debating on the fact that these measures were not enough. The Colonial Era left behind a full set of norms, behaviours, customs, and beliefs, based on the generally white, Christian, and Eurocentric vision of the world. This vision classified the world through the European vs. Non-European dichotomy, a binary soon translated into Civilized vs. Primitive. Such a framework was termed by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano "coloniality", or the colonial matrix of power, and will be used throughout this paper as a reference.

Most of the former colonies went through a process of de-westernization; that is, liberation from the colonial state, and the transfer of power and resources to new elites. In many cases the new governing class did not question the political, social, and economic system since it had been set up by the colonial power and they considered the governance and cultural model established/imposed by former occupiers as valid and appropriate. In most cases, the new ruling class simply substituted the old one, while leaving the colonial epistemology the system was based on nearly untouched. While physical decolonization took place, the coloniality of power knowledge and being often remained unchallenged.

However, according to an increasing number of scholars (e.g. [Grosfoguel, 2007](#))

a real decolonial process is only possible if the colonial framework is challenged in the way power relations, being and knowledge are embodied, realised and organised. Paraphrasing [Fanon \(1952\)](#), it is the very idea of self that is shaped by colonial principles and rules, and it is only through a conscious and critical analysis of one's own culture that a decolonial process can be triggered.

## 2. MAPS AND COLONIALITY

*"The map contributes to controlling territory as the state controls its inhabitants through those institutions, tools that transform inhabitants into subjects for the state's reproduction."*

*(Bellone at al. 2020, paraphrasing Foucault, 1977).*

Mapping is crucial for epistemology, as it contributes to the way we organise the world we see, and how we relate to reality. It is not by chance that during the process of occupation, colonial powers rushed to draw maps of newly conquered territories, ignoring previously existing knowledge and tools for definition, organization, and division of land. In many cases, maps also represent the ambitions and claims of certain countries over others, rather than the reality on the ground (see, for example, Dunlop on Alsace-Lorraine, 2015<sup>1</sup>).

Scholars working from a decolonial perspective have looked at the way maps are drawn and used, and have mainly focused on:

1. How inclusive the process of map drawing is (are people living in

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Dunlop. Cartophilia: Maps and the Search for Identity in the French-German Borderland. Chicago: Chicago UP, 201

- certain territories participating in the mapping process?)
2. How the maps represent and repropose (or not) colonialist and imperialistic views of the world. Which point of view is reported through maps?

This brief shifts the focus from the production of maps towards their usage and focuses on a selected set of institutions and agencies engaged in international development. Development agencies choose their visual communication, which includes the presence (or in certain cases the absence) of maps. This choice has an impact on their communication and conveys messages related to the vision of the world that is at the foundation of their policies and actions.

### 3. THE AID SECTOR AND THE USE OF MAPS

With the umbrella term “aid sector”, we refer to actors engaged in international development and humanitarian assistance. This sector is directly linked to colonial history and had been identified by many as a form of neocolonialism. There are several signs of momentum for decoloniality in the sector, and various initiatives have been implemented at different levels to question the colonial foundations of the aid industry. Such initiatives include visual communication, especially linked to the use and production of photos that too often reproduce the stereotype of the white savior and the poor, usually non-white, victim of poverty, war, hunger etc. However, very little is being said on how agencies choose and use projections of the world in their visual communication.

Maps are a crucial tool in the aid sector: as they are used to understand and choose the context where the organizations work, to communicate with donors, participants, and

audience. Moreover, when working in international development cooperation, not only do we practitioners use maps, but we also create them – continuously. One example is the World Bank interactive tool: this tool is based on a Mercator projection, and will be better analysed later in this paper. A second, more recent example, is the current situation in Gaza (November 2023), where some of the most updated information is shared with the world via [UNOCHA](#) and the data gathered through humanitarian professionals in the field. Maps are so important in our work that there are courses for mapping dedicated to our [sector](#).

Interestingly enough, while most of such training includes sessions on the need for participative mapping exercises, we found no mention of sessions explaining the differences among the main projections and the possible meaning behind them.

### 4. MAPPING

The debate around the adequacy of maps is old and well documented in literature (see again Dunlop 2015). However, after World War II, in the wake of movements linked to peace, anticolonialism and non-aligned countries, it gained new, greater, more transnational dimensions. In the 70s and 80s, the choice of certain maps over others became a political statement, as reported by [Timothy Barney \(2014\)](#). This reflects some of the earlier 17th century mapping practices of Europe, in which the contested provinces such as Alsace were mapped according to local names and cultures. Today we witness a return of the debate to a more local level, the best example of this being the debate about Google and Apple [not reporting Palestinian territories on their maps](#).

*“Maps demonstrate the connection between countries. They are also highly subjective and allow for distortion. To simply scale down the 3D globe to a 2D projection involves alterations as the mapmaker must choose what scale, orientation, key etc. These choices are often linked to the purpose of the map and the intended users. Behind the mapmaker, and these decisions, often lies a set of power relations, as deliberate distortions are commonly for advancing agendas” (Struck, 2016).*

#### 4.1 MERCATOR PROJECTION

The most widely used bidimensional projection is the Mercator projection. Proposed in 1569 to serve navigation needs (and therefore some might argue directly linked to colonial activities), it is still considered among the best approximations for those who need a map for purposes such as navigation and identification of time zone. As of today, it is also the default map proposed by many mapping software and visualization tools.

While the Mercator projection faithfully replicates the shape of represented land, it does not respect dimensions and proportions, and it is developed from a clearly Eurocentric perspective (Europe sits at the centre of the map). “Mercator’s projection of the world, which, in privileging distance over area, emphasised the size of the global North and de-emphasised the size of the global South, was to become hegemonic” (Bellone, 2000).

The criticism to the Mercator approach came two centuries later and gained more prominence with the Gall projection proposed in 1855, “which critiqued Mercator’s map for privileging the needs of navigators while sacrificing form, polar distance, and proportionate area. Arno Peters would later build on Gall with the [Gall–Peters projection \(1973\)](#), offering a

highly unconventional representation of the earth’s surface and aiming to eliminate the ‘normal’ Eurocentric image of the world found in common atlases” (ibid).

Amongst all alternative propositions to Mercator, Peters’ became the most influential because it managed to trigger a debate related to the values carried by maps, especially those related to the Euro-Centric imperialistic world view. It gathered initial success among progressive circles, yet, it also attracted many objections and doubts ([Barney 2014](#)) linked to the third world movement and decolonial movement. So much so that, as Peters himself said, his map stopped being a projection and became a symbol ([Hruby 2017](#)).

When looking at alternative projections, one should not make the same mistake: as all maps are approximations, there are no perfect maps and there are projections that are more useful than others for certain purposes. However, what is relevant for development agencies is to be aware of, and transparent about which maps one is using, which content these maps deliver, and for which purpose a certain map is used over another.

## 5. RESEARCH DESIGN

Our starting point is the identification of coloniality of knowledge; that is the (often unconscious) assumption that everything that stems from the Eurocentric knowledge production is better and more scientific than any other effort.

The Mercator projection has been, for centuries, the most widely used map of the world, and its expansion is linked to European colonialism, not only physical occupation of territories but also the imposition of certain frameworks in science and education.

We assume that agencies that use the Mercator projection are doing so not because they want to portray and amplify a certain (Eurocentric and imperialist) vision of the world but simply because they did not consider its use to be a problem. And it is exactly in this automation that we recognise coloniality, which lies in fact in the way certain tools and world-views are simply not questioned and alternative approaches not considered.

Based on this, we are using the presence of the Mercator projection as a proxy for coloniality.

The research design was developed to help answer the following research questions:

What cartographic visuals do key actors in international aid use in their communications when presenting the world?

Do these visualizations support the notion of coloniality?

The research consisted of primary data collection. For this we chose the official website as the most relevant and representative communication channel. We identified the following groups of international aid actors:

- 1) official Development Agencies of the Development Assistance Committee members (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and EU member states,
- 2) selected United Nations agencies,
- 3) International Non-Governmental Organizations,
- 4) Think-Tanks (top 30 International Development Policy think tanks) and
- 5) Foundations (top 30 with international activities).

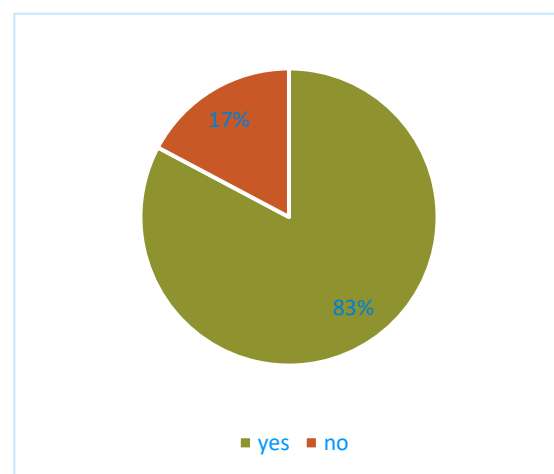
However, it was beyond the scale of this brief to conduct a detailed assessment of all these actors and we therefore only focused on official development agencies. For each country we chose only one institution.

In total, we included 29 development agencies' (or equivalent institutions) websites in the primary data collection. Each website was explored to document the type of cartographic visuals each institution used. If a cartographic visualization was identified, it was categorised either as a map (1), a globe (2), or something else (3). In the case of a map, we further evaluated whether it was a Mercator-like projection, or a non-Mercator-like projection. It was not the purpose of this research to precisely identify the type of cartographic projection each organization used, but rather to establish if their chosen projection supports the notion of decoloniality.

The literature review used the following keywords: #mapping, #coloniality, #decoloniality, #decolonialmap, #mercatorprojection, #petersprojection.

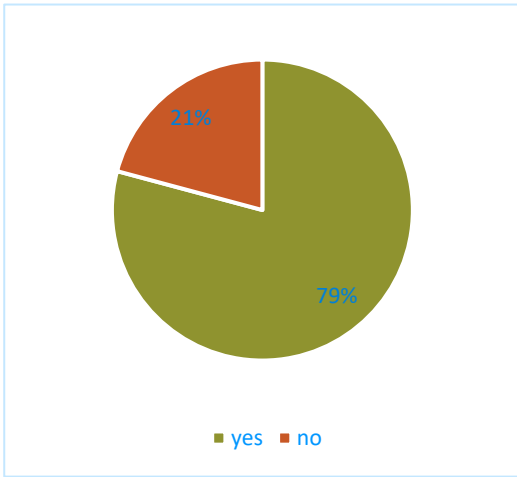
## 5.1 RESULTS IN BRIEF

The initial assessment reveals that the vast majority of official development agencies use cartographic visuals in their presentations (24 out of 29 institutions). All institutions that use cartographic visuals use a map rather than a globe. The Mercator projection is the prevailing visualization for those that use cartographic visualizations. No institution explained the use of its chosen map projection.



**Graph 1:** Use of cartographic visuals





Graph 2: Use of Mercator projection

In our research we encountered many examples that followed the standard default Mercator projection. However, there were a few that did not. For example, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation publishes an interactive map using a non-Mercator projection. Their map allows for the selection of several priority regions where only the regional map is visualised.

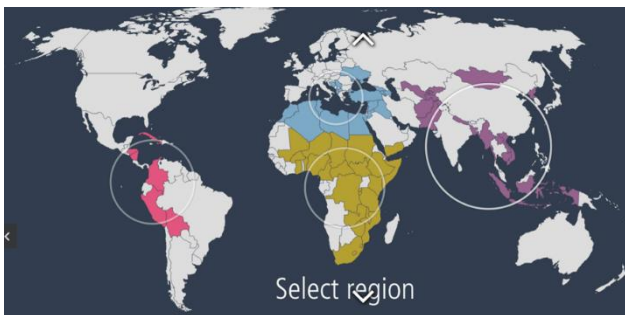


Figure 1: Swiss development agency cartographic visualisation

Similarly, several countries only choose to display parts of the world that are relevant for their communications, i.e. zooming in on regions with priority countries.

However, there are also examples of agencies that choose a cartographic visual without an apparent link to the content of the presentation. The Lithuanian development agency uses a map of Europe

underlying their priority countries, where only a few of those are in the area the map depicts. The reason for choosing this map is not provided.

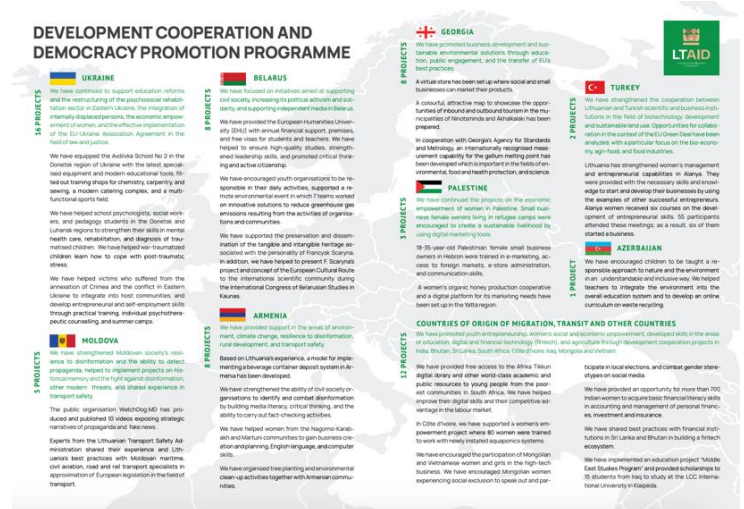


Figure 2: Lithuanian development agency report

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The link between colonialism and development cooperation has been the subject of study and research for decades. This policy brief is based on the belief that adopting Anibal Quijano's coloniality framework could give a meaningful contribution to the debate.

According to such a framework, coloniality is embedded in the mindset of the people and institutions that are engaged in development cooperation. An effort needs to be made to acknowledge such bias so that people and institutions can consciously act to prevent it.

Through this policy brief we have aimed to show how coloniality is also hidden in visual communication and in particular in the way the world is depicted by development agencies.

Although limited, we consider that such data is already showing a trend, and we

therefore decided to list some preliminary recommendations:

- Current technology allows the use of revolving globes in visual communication. We encourage all agencies to prioritise the revolving globe over bidimensional projections;
- Explain choices: the public is increasingly used to reading disclaimers, and a couple of lines might serve the purpose of showing your audience that you are aware of the meaning that each projection carries, and explain why you prefer one projection over the other;
- Train your staff: every person working in development agencies can give meaningful contributions to fight coloniality. We should not assume that this kind of change needs to be pursued exclusively by advocacy or program teams. Human resources, Logistics, Administration, Finance, IT teams should also be aware of coloniality and of the importance of their contribution;
- The notion of coloniality in countries' official development assistance presentation, including the use of cartographic tools should become part of the DAC (Development Assistance Committee) review process. This will help in giving the issue the attention it deserves.

### *Acknowledgements*

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## DATA SOURCES

Australia: [Australia's Development Program](#)  
Austria: [Austrian Development Agency](#)  
Belgium: [National Center for Cooperation and Development](#)  
Canada: [Government of Canada: Global issues and international assistance](#)  
Czech Republic: [Czech Development Agency](#)  
Denmark: [Danida OpenAid](#)  
EU: [European Union External Action Service](#)  
Finland: [Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)  
France: [Agence Française de Développement](#)  
Germany: [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH](#)  
Greece: [Hellenic Aid, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece](#)  
Hungary: [Department for International Development, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#)  
Iceland: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Development Cooperation](#)  
Ireland: [Department of Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid](#)  
Italy: [Italian Agency for Development Cooperation](#)  
Japan: [Japan International Cooperation Agency](#)  
Korea: [Korea International Cooperation Agency](#)  
Lithuania: [Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)  
Luxembourg: [Directorate for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs](#)  
The Netherlands: [Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Development Cooperation](#)  
New Zealand: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#)  
Norway: [Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation](#)  
Poland: [Polish Aid](#)  
Portugal: [Camões Institute for Cooperation](#)  
Slovak Republic: [SlovakAid](#)  
Spain: [Spanish platform for development co-operation](#)  
Sweden: [Swedfund](#)  
Switzerland: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate for Development and Cooperation](#)  
USA: [USAID](#)

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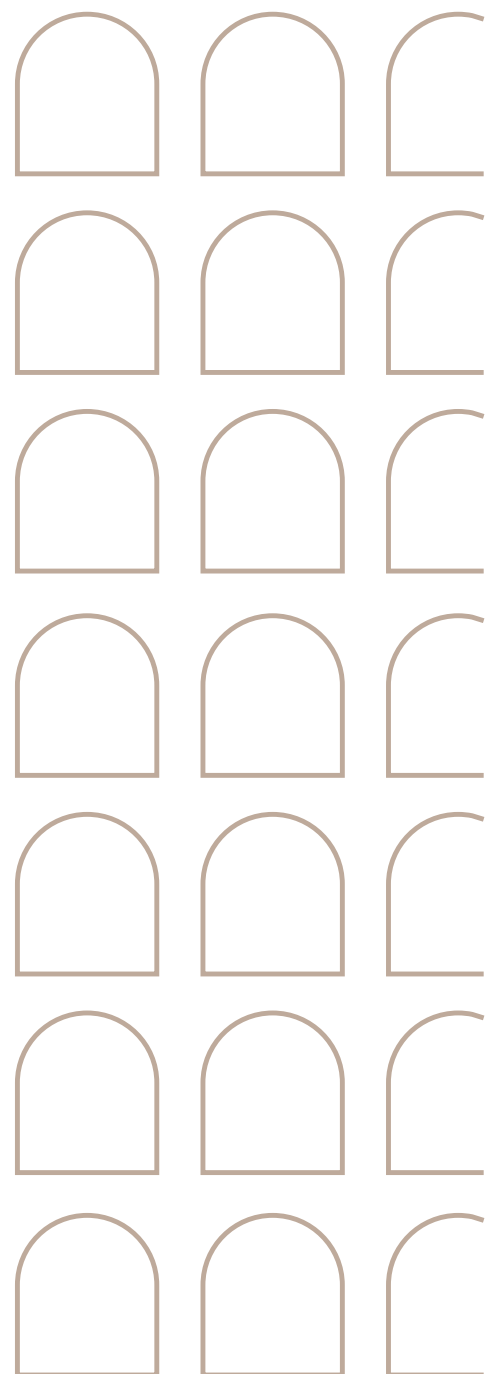
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