

STATUS QUO, PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEWING IN BULGARIA AND THE NECESSITY FOR URGENT MEASURES

Original Scientific Paper

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Abstract

This study examines the awareness, application, and training needs related to the 2021 Mendez Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering among law enforcement authorities and other relevant professionals in Bulgaria. Based on a small-scale empirical survey of 100 participants, the findings indicate that familiarity with the Principles is limited, yet there is a strong interest in specialized training. The study highlights gaps in current investigative practices and offers practical recommendations to align questioning procedures with international human rights and ethical standards, ultimately promoting more effective and humane information-gathering processes.

Keywords

Mendez Principles, Bulgaria, Investigation practices, Training, ImpleMendez Project

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary legal science and practice, it is widely recognized that interrogations conducted by police and other law enforcement agencies play a critical role in obtaining reliable and detailed information to support investigations and advance criminal justice objectives. However, such interrogations must be conducted under conditions that respect the human rights of those being questioned, comply with legal safeguards, and uphold high ethical standards. Despite these requirements, reports of abuse and unethical interrogation practices continue to emerge in many countries, including within Europe (Investigating alleged ill-treatment at the European Union's external borders – 2025 update, n.d.). Bulgaria is similarly affected, as evidenced by multiple European Court of Human Rights decisions finding violations in pre-trial procedures (Yordan Petrov v. Bulgaria, 2012; Bekirski v. Bulgaria, 2010).

The Méndez Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering (2021) (Interviewing Principles, n.d.) were developed to address interrogation practices

that undermine the presumption of innocence, prioritize confessions, and may involve manipulation, threats, or physical coercion, ultimately resulting in ineffective investigations and compromised justice (Walsh et al., 2016; Barela & Fallon, 2021; Bernath, 2021; Méndez & Drummond, 2021; Wawrzyńczak, 2025).

In Bulgaria, relevant authorities have not been at the forefront of adopting innovative investigative practices. Interrogation traditions remain rigid, and progress in this domain has been limited. Barriers to innovation include legal constraints, cultural resistance to change, and institutional inertia. This paper analyzes scientifically identified problems, as well as the challenges and prospects associated with transitioning toward modern, evidence-based investigative interviewing.

According to the Council of Europe (2021), Bulgaria has recently introduced significant reforms aimed at improving the effectiveness of investigations, including the establishment of a mechanism for the independent investigation of acts committed by the Chief Prosecutor and the provision for judicial review of refusals to open criminal investigations. However, these developments underscore ongoing challenges in fully understanding and implementing principles such as the Méndez Principles and modern investigative interviewing methods, leaving policy gaps that may affect the fairness and effectiveness of Bulgaria's justice system.

Efforts to inform law enforcement authorities are still at an early stage and largely limited to isolated projects. The Méndez Principles were only recently translated into Bulgarian (December 2025), are not explicitly incorporated into university or academic curricula, and comprehensive research on the topic in Bulgarian remains scarce (Chankova, 2025a). This knowledge gap hampers the alignment of Bulgaria's criminal justice system with international standards, potentially compromising the rights of vulnerable individuals and the integrity of investigations. Currently, most knowledge about the Principles and developments in investigative interviewing is derived from foreign scholars (Milne & Bull, 1999; Walsh et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2024; May et al., 2025) and the United Nations Manual on Investigative Interviewing for Criminal Investigation (2024). No dedicated training infrastructure exists, and awareness of the importance of effective implementation remains limited. Addressing these gaps is essential for reforming investigative practices and ensuring that justice outcomes comply with both national and international standards.

METHODS

To verify these observations and assess the need for reforms aligned with the Méndez Principles, a small-scale empirical survey was conducted in the summer of 2025 as part of COST Project CA 22128, "Establishing Networks to Implement the Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations" (IMPLEMENDEZ) 2023–2027 (COST, n.d.). Supported by Bulgarian stakeholders of the Project, this initiative involved developing and distributing an anonymous electronic questionnaire to a specialized audience of 100 participants, evenly divided among police officers, public prosecutors, academics, and NGO representatives.

The scope of the survey highlights its limitations: it was not intended to provide a nationally representative picture but rather to draw attention to urgent steps necessary to align Bulgaria with international developments in investigative interviewing theory and practice. Although the inquiry was qualitative in nature, several notable findings were identified and are presented and analyzed below.

RESULTS

Results are presented in accordance with the structure of the questionnaire. **The first question posed to respondents was: *Are you familiar with the Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering (Méndez Principles)*?** The responses are presented below.

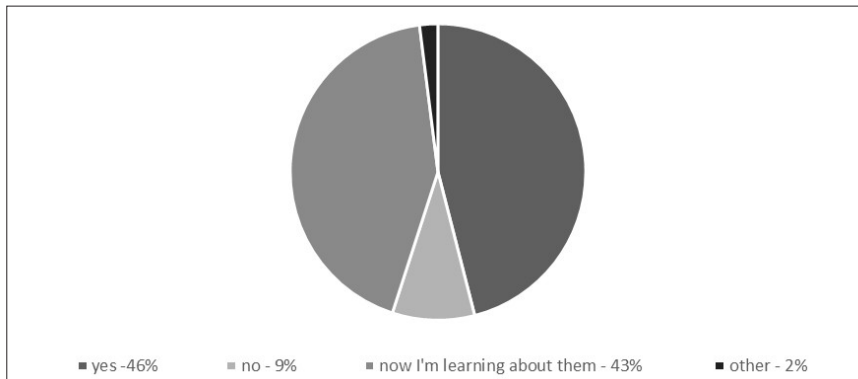


Figure 1. Familiarity of the respondents with the Méndez Principles

A total of 46% of participants reported being familiar with the Méndez Principles, which corresponds with the specialized and well-educated nature of the sample. However, 43% indicated that they became aware of the Principles only through their participation in the survey. When combined with the 9% who explicitly stated that they were unfamiliar with the Principles, this results in a majority of respondents (52%) lacking prior knowledge. Only 2% expressed an undefined position. This finding is noteworthy, as it is both expected and necessary that all individuals involved in investigative questioning possess adequate knowledge of these Principles.

The second question, serving as a control question, was: *If you are familiar with the Méndez Principles, in what format did you receive information about them?*

Only 6% of respondents reported receiving information about the Méndez Principles during their university education, which is unsurprising given the recent adoption of the Principles and their limited incorporation into academic curricula, typically depending on the initiative of well-informed faculty members. As most respondents completed their studies before 2021, the year in which the Principles were introduced, this finding is expected. Furthermore, 17% indicated that they became familiar with the Principles through seminars or conferences, while 6% reported acquiring such knowledge through specialized training. A majority of respondents (61%) stated that they learned about the Principles through “other means,” without providing further specification.

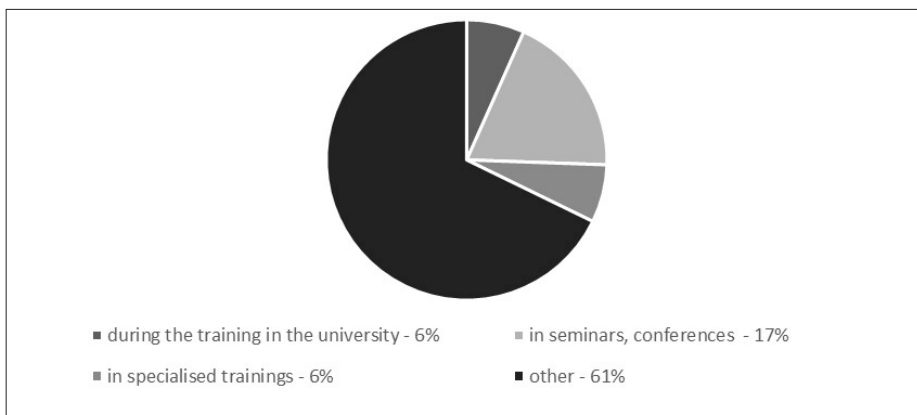


Figure 2. Format of receiving information about the Mendez Principles

Respondents were further directly asked: **Do you observe the Méndez Principles in your professional practice?**

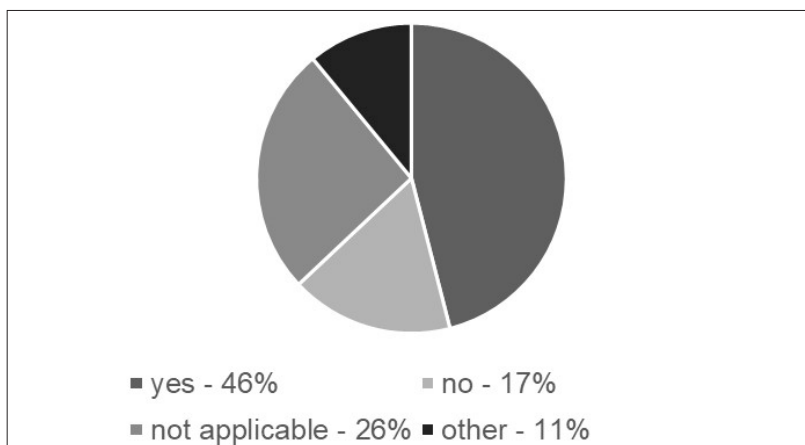


Figure 3. The observance of the Mendez Principles

Out of 100 respondents, 46% reported applying the Principles in practice, 17% reported they do not, 26% —mainly representatives from academia and NGOs indicated the Principles are not applicable to their work, and 11% did not provide a clear answer. The responses indicate that a substantial proportion of participants are either not familiar with the Principles or do not apply them in practice.

Participants were also asked a more general question: **Do you think that the current Bulgarian legal framework for interrogations aligns with the Méndez Principles?**

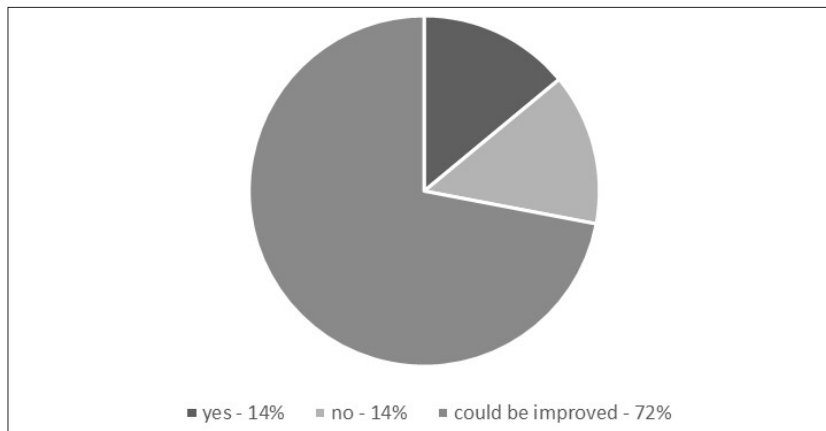


Figure 4. Correspondence of the current Bulgarian legal framework of interrogations to the Mendez Principles

A substantial majority of respondents (72%) believe that the legal framework requires improvement, indicating the need for further action. Meanwhile, equal proportions of participants (14% each) express clearly positive and clearly negative views.

A specific question was posed to the respondents: *Do you find the use of audio and video recordings in questioning appropriate?*

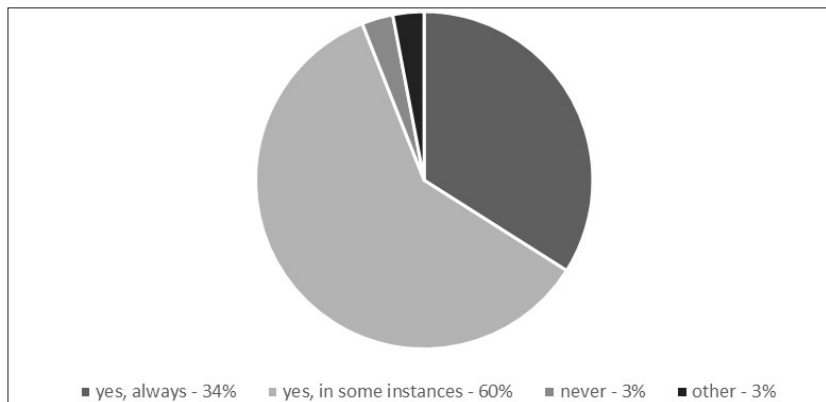


Figure 5. Appropriateness of the use of audio and video recordings in questioning

A significant proportion of respondents (34%) consider the use of audio and video recordings to always be a good decision. However, the majority (60%) believe that such recordings are appropriate only in certain situations, such as during the questioning of juveniles or vulnerable persons. A small minority (3%) do not rely on recordings and do not consider their use appropriate, while an additional 3% believe that recordings should also be used in other investigative actions.

The question, ***What is the meaning of creating a psychological environment of trust between an interrogator and an interviewee?***, received an almost unanimous response:

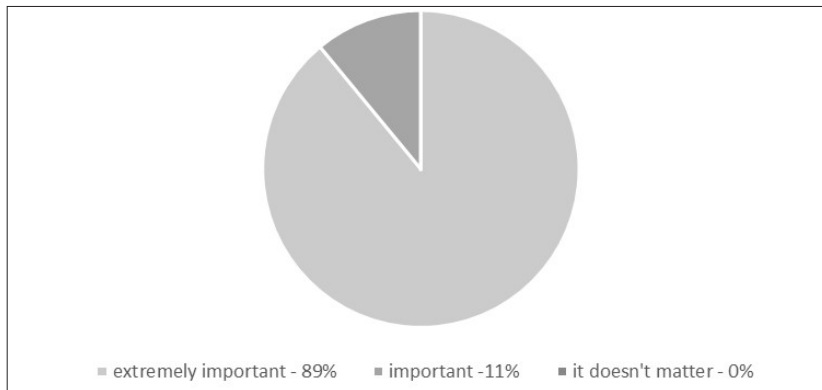


Figure 6. The meaning of the psychological environment of trust between an interrogator and an interviewee

Out of 100 respondents, 89% rated the psychological environment of trust as extremely important, and 11% rated it as important. Open-ended comments were collected but are reported separately. The findings provide a strong foundation for transitioning investigative interviewing practices toward rapport-based approaches aligned with the Principles.

The follow-up question, ***Is it necessary to develop additional protocols, informational materials, and other measures to better protect rights during questioning?***, received the following responses:

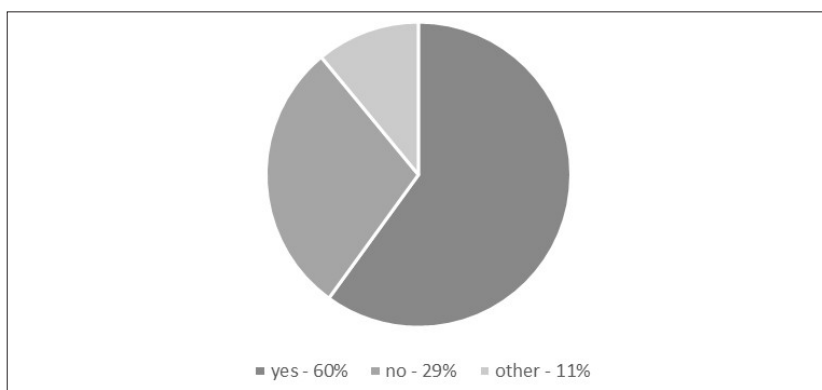


Figure 7. Necessity of additional protocols and information materials

Out of 100 respondents, 60 indicated that developing additional protocols and informational materials is necessary, 29 indicated that it is not necessary, and 11 selected 'undefined' or did not provide a clear answer.

One of the most important questions in the survey was: *Do you think it is necessary to provide additional specialized training on the Méndez Principles?*

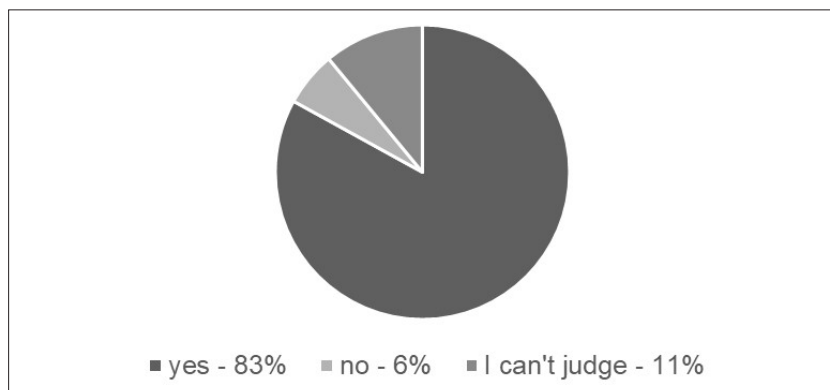


Figure 8. Necessity of additional specialised training for Mendez principles

The majority of respondents (83%) considered additional specialized training on the Méndez Principles essential. Only 6% felt that such training was unnecessary, while 11%—primarily academics and representatives of NGOs—were unable to provide a judgment.

The survey also included the following question: *If you consider additional training necessary, at which level should it be implemented?* Respondents could select multiple answers.

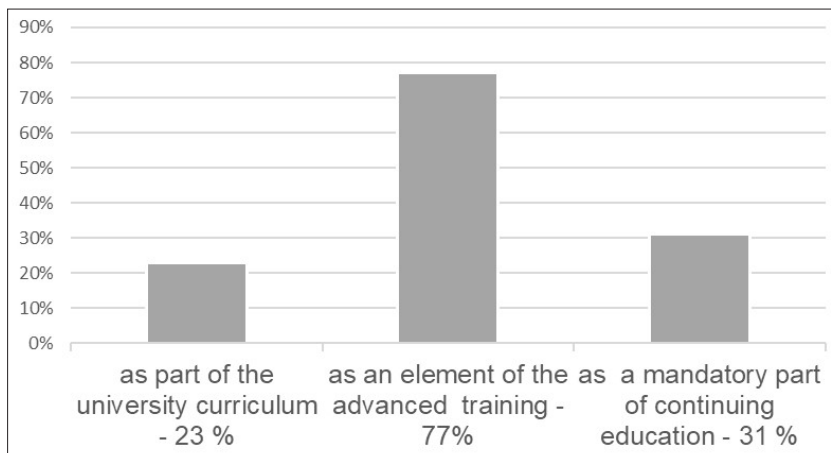


Figure 9. Format of the specialized training

The vast majority of respondents (77%) indicated that training on the Méndez Principles should be included in advanced professional training. At the same time, 23% considered it appropriate to integrate such training into university curricula, while 31% viewed it as a mandatory component of continuing education.

Finally, two open-ended questions were posed. The first question asked: *What are the current needs related to the application of the Méndez Principles in Bulgarian criminal proceedings*

Besides the points already mentioned, the predominant responses of the participants included:

- Mandatory training (both theoretical and practical) should specifically focus on interviewing minors, representatives of minority groups, and female participants in cases of sexual offenses;
- Training should include more knowledge in the fields of psychology and human rights;
- Robust procedural safeguards should be adopted and applied when dealing with highly vulnerable individuals;
- Video recording should be used whenever other methods of evidence collection are applied;
- Strict monitoring of compliance with the Méndez Principles is necessary; among other suggestions.

The second open-ended question asked: *What do you think are the potential challenges that may be encountered during the implementation of the Méndez Principles?*

The predominant responses included:

- A lack of experienced trainers in the field;
- Resistance from more senior colleagues who may need to change established practices;
- High turnover and limited qualifications within investigative bodies;
- Difficulties in the legislative process and administrative practices that hinder full implementation of the Principles; among other challenges.

DISCUSSION

As previously noted, the findings of this small-scale survey cannot be considered fully representative of the entire country. Nevertheless, given that the participants constitute a diverse, engaged, and presumably well-informed group, the results offer valuable illustrative insights. When combined with the author's own investigations and observations, these findings provide a meaningful basis for discussion and for drawing preliminary conclusions.

The survey confirms the initial hypotheses regarding the current status of the popularity and application of the Méndez Principles in Bulgaria. Among the respondents, a substantial proportion of criminal law practitioners are either unfamiliar with the Principles or do not apply them in practice, highlighting a significant knowledge gap. Beyond this lack of knowledge, potential personal resistance may also hinder implementation, as adopting the Principles requires challenging long-established practices and stereotypes, particularly among law enforcement authorities from earlier generations. Nevertheless, a gradual shift in attitude toward the implementation of the Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering is already observable. This change is likely to have a direct or indirect impact on the outcomes, fairness, efficiency, and reliability of criminal and other proceedings (Baker-Eck, Bull, & Walsh, 2020).

The proper and complete application of the Méndez Principles is supported by the majority of surveyed groups, as it provides significant added value to every process of information gathering. It ensures that no person is subjected to coercion, torture, or other forms of ill-treatment, protects the physical and mental integrity of individuals interacting with public authorities, and enhances respect for the rights of vulnerable persons. The critical importance of creating a psychological environment of trust, as well as the central role of psychology in interrogations, is widely recognized (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Gudjonsson, 2018). At the same time, the survey findings reveal shortcomings and areas for improvement. Despite recent advances in criminal proceedings, there remains room for the legal frameworks governing the questioning of accused persons, victims, and witnesses to be further improved and harmonized with European and international standards, thereby aligning practices more closely with the Méndez Principles (Chankova, 2025b). Emerging scientific insights from psychology, victimology, medicine, neurology, sociology, and related fields should be fully incorporated into both legislation and investigative practice (Griffith et al., 2023). Ethical standards could also be further strengthened (European Commission, 2025). The use of audio and video recordings in questioning is widely supported. Respondents highlighted the need for deeper knowledge regarding individuals in situations of vulnerability and heightened vulnerability, as well as the urgent need for robust procedural safeguards to be adopted and consistently applied.

An important conclusion from the research is that the vast majority of participants consider additional specialized training in the Méndez Principles both necessary and beneficial for their professional practice. Respondents suggested that further educational initiatives are warranted and even specified parameters for such training, emphasizing a combination of theoretical and practical components, along with enhanced knowledge in psychology and human rights. To address these training needs, concrete initiatives should be implemented using diverse training models. Establishing a train-the-trainer program would enable experienced trainers to disseminate knowledge efficiently across organizations, while an e-learning platform could provide scalable access to interactive modules, increasing both accessibility and flexibility in education on the Méndez Principles. Furthermore, partnerships with international organizations experienced in investigative interviewing could enrich the training content and introduce a global perspective. These initiatives have the potential to encourage policymakers to undertake actionable steps toward effective implementation, as they could contribute to the development of theory and legislation while producing tangible practical benefits.

Top policy priorities emerging from this analysis include amending legal frameworks to align with the Méndez Principles, establishing comprehensive training programs for all levels of law enforcement, and implementing robust monitoring systems to ensure adherence to ethical standards during interrogations. These urgent reforms are intended to enhance the effectiveness, fairness, and integrity of Bulgaria's criminal justice system. It should be noted that the COST Action CA 22128 (IMPLEMENDEZ) has already contributed to positive developments in Bulgaria. The Méndez Principles were discussed at two conferences: in 2024 at Sofia University and in 2025 at Varna Free University. The first publications on the topic in Bulgarian are anticipated. The initiative has attracted the attention of the Police, the Prosecutor's Office, academia, and NGOs. What remains crucial is that these research findings are taken seriously by policymakers and decision-makers, leading to the implementation of relevant steps and improvements.

CONCLUSION

There is already substantial evidence that the Méndez Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering are effective globally and should be implemented in Bulgaria as well. Current investigative practices are in urgent need of transformation. Among the majority of criminal law practitioners, there is not only an understanding of the Principles but also a perceived necessity for change. The primary challenge remains the acquisition of adequate knowledge, specialized training, and broad recognition of the Principles.

The widespread implementation of the Méndez Principles is part of the global movement toward a more humane and efficient criminal justice system and enhanced protection of victims, and it should be actively adopted by Bulgarian policymakers and criminal justice practitioners (Ilcheva & Berbec, 2021). Relevant institutions should invest time and resources in information dissemination and training to ensure proper application. Establishing a Méndez Centre of Excellence for Investigative Interviewing in the Balkans could accelerate these processes.

Such an initiative should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, involving collaboration among government bodies, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Funding could be sourced from national allocations, European Union grants, and partnerships with international human rights organizations. Policymakers should define a clear pathway from concept to implementation to ensure that the Centre has the capacity to drive meaningful reform in investigative interviewing practices.

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