Mexico

No. 14

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Mexico

Mexico is a country of immigration, transmigration - mostly from Central America to the United States - and emigration, mostly to the United States. For the past century, emigration has far outweighed the other forms of international migration, yet the influences of all three forms of migration have been felt.

Historical Development

Immigration

Like countries throughout the Western Hemisphere, Mexico attempted to attract immigrants from Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Few immigrants came, however, due to high levels of political instability in Mexico and more attractive alternatives for transatlantic migrants, such as the United States, Argentina, and Canada. Only half a percent of late-nineteenth-century transatlantic European immigrants settled in Mexico. With the failure to draw Europeans, Mexico tried to attract Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Yet, when the United States closed the door to most non-European immigrants in the 1920s Mexico quickly followed suit, restricting the entry of Asians, Middle Easterners, and Eastern Europeans as part of a racist backlash against the post-revolu-



tionary imagining of Mexico as a mestizo nation forged of Spaniards and the indigenous population. The foreign-born share of the Mexican population rose from 0.4 percent in 1900 to 1 per cent in 1930, but since then has gradually declined, reaching 0.5 percent in 2000.

Background Information

Capital: Mexico City

Official language: Spanish

Area: 1,972,550 km²

Population (2007): 108.7 million (CIA Factbook)

Population density (2005): 54.5 inhabitants per km² (CIA)

Population growth (2006): 0.89% (OECD)

Labour force participation rate (2007): 42% (CIA Factbook)

Foreign population as

a percentage of total (2000): 0.5% (INEGI)

Unemployment rate (2007): 3.7% (CIA Factbook)

Religions (2000): Roman Catholic 76.5%, Protestant 6.3%,

Unspecified 13.8%, Other/ None 3.4% (INEGI)

Emigration

Nineteenth Century Conquest

Migration between Mexico and the United States is "the largest sustained flow of migrant workers in the contemporary world." Mexico shares a 3200-kilometer border with the United States. The difficulty of policing such a long border, and the exposure that it implies between the two countries, are two reasons why Mexican migration has been so intense. Yet few immigrants were born in the border region; most are from states hundreds of kilometers south. Indeed, 2300 kilometers of highway separate the city of Tijuana on the northwest border with California from Guadalajara in the heart of Mexico's migrant-sending region in the Central West. Military and economic interventions by the United States, direct U.S. recruitment, and turmoil in Mexico have played a fundamental historical role in generating migration from Mexico to the United States.

The 1836 secession of Texas and 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending a two-year war between the United States and Mexico, stripped Mexico of more than half of its territory. About 80,000 Mexicans lived in the northern territory at the time. In the felicitous phrase of contemporary immigrant activists, they





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didn't cross the border; the border crossed them. Most Mexicans in the United States trace their ancestry to twentieth century migration, however. Demographers estimate that had there not been any migration from Mexico in the twentieth century, the Mexican-origin population of the United States would only be 14 per cent of its current size.²

Recruitment and Revolution

Significant migration to the United States began at the turn of the twentieth century as recruiters from U.S. railroads and farms, known as enganchadores, traveled into the Mexican interior seeking workers. From 1917 to 1921, the United States brought in 70,000 contracted workers as a unilateral emergency measure to fill labor shortages from World War I. The 1910-1920 Mexican Revolution and the Cristero wars between the secularizing government and Catholic rebels in the late 1920s and 1930s sent hundreds of thousands fleeing north. The border with the United States was effectively open at the time, as the U.S. Border Patrol was not created until 1924, and countries in the Western Hemisphere were exempted from the annual quotas assigned by the U.S. to countries from 1921 to 1965. U.S. employers in the Southwest generally preferred Mexican workers to other nationalities because they were assumed to be a docile workforce that not only would accept low wages and harsh working conditions, but would also return home to Mexico when demand for their labor was slack. During the Great Depression between 1929 and 1939, an estimated 400,000 Mexicans, including many U.S. citizens by virtue of birth in the United States, were repatriated to Mexico.

Increased U.S. demand for labor during World War II led to the 1942 "Bracero" program that continued in various forms until 1964, providing 4.5 million contracts to temporary migrant workers. Unauthorized migration outpaced legal migration during the latter years of the program. The most significant consequence in the long run was the deep embedding of migration into the economic life and cultural expectations of communities in rural Mexico. Bracero pioneers anchored chain migration between individual Mexican communities and particular destinations in the United States to the point that many rural communities in Mexico have more members in satellite communities in the United States than they do at home.

NAFTA and the Persistent Wage Gap

The wage differential between the United States and Mexico has historically been about ten to one. The wage differential for low-skilled workers, which is more relevant for most Mexican migrants, is about five to one. Most Mexican migrants are not unemployed prior to migrating, nor do they come from the poorest states in Mexico. The problem for Mexico is not so much unemployment, but rather underemployment and persistently low wages relative to those that can be earned in the United States. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which went into effect in 1994, was sold politically in part as a means to reduce migration by creating more and better paying jobs in the export sector of the Mexican economy. Trade between Mexico and the United States has tripled since NAFTA went into effect, but NAFTA has created both winners and losers in Mexico. It has been a disaster from the point of

view of subsistence farmers. They are unable to compete with U.S. agribusinesses enjoying massive government subsidies, economies of scale, use of the latest technology, and easy access to capital. As the Mexican government's corn subsidies have been phased out under NAFTA, Mexican corn farmers are migrating to the United States. A similar process has unwound in the cattle and poultry industries. Mexico now imports half of its meat from the United States while Mexican migrants displaced from their home economies are increasingly working as meatpackers in Midwestern U.S. states.

Immigration

In 2000, there were 493,000 foreign-born residents of Mexico. The largest contingents of foreign-born are descendents of Mexican emigrants born in the United States and U.S. and Canadian retirees concentrated in places like the Pacific coasts of Baja California and Sonora, San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, and the Lake Chapala area outside Guadalajara in the Central West. These groups represent 63.2% of the foreign-born older than five years, followed by Europeans (11.9%), Central Americans (11.2%), South Americans (7.3%), Asians (2.9%), and others (1.0%).⁴ Half of the foreign-born are located in just five states: the Federal District, Baja California, Jalisco, Chihuahua, and the state of México. Immigrants tend to be highly educated. Nearly two thirds have a high school education or greater, compared to only a fifth of the Mexican population as a whole.⁵

Refugees

Political refugees have been a major source of flows to Mexico. The 1934-1940 administration of Lázaro Cárdenas welcomed 40,000 Republican exiles from the Spanish Civil War. Despite their small numbers, the descendents of these migrations and exiles from the 1970s 'dirty wars' in the Southern Cone have had a disproportionately high impact on Mexican intellectual, cultural and professional life. In the 1980s, refugees from Central America began passing through Mexico in large numbers bound for the United States. About 80,000 Guatemalans sought refuge in Mexico from the Civil War. Many were housed in camps under the authority of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. About three quarters returned to Guatemala following the 1996 peace accords, and the rest were given the option to naturalize in Mexico.⁶

Transmigration

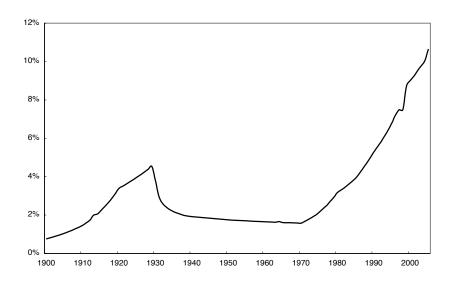
Mexico is a major country of transit for unauthorized migration to the United States. It shares more than 1000 kilometers of border with Guatemala and Belize, much of it through rugged jungle or forested terrain in the poorest parts of Mexico. Train routes leading north have been a popular and dangerous means of illicit migration, all the more since gangs have made a steady business of preying on migrants. Since the 1990s, the Mexican authorities have increased their presence along transportation routes in the frontier region even as the border itself remains largely unguarded. Authorities denied entry or deported 125,000

migrants in 1990, which rose to 250,000 by 2005. The primary source countries of transmigrants are Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Despite these efforts, and given widespread corruption among Mexican law enforcement, many migrants are able to cross Mexico from south to north. In fiscal year 2005, non-Mexicans made up approximately 14 percent of U.S. Border Patrol apprehensions, most of them made on the U.S. Mexico border. Smaller groups of migrants from China and Ecuador have been intercepted trying to reach Mexico by sea with the intention of then crossing over into the United States by land, though there are no reliable estimates of the numbers of seaborne entrants.

Emigration

One of the most unusual features of Mexican migration is the concentration of more than 98 percent of its migrants on one destination – the United States. Exposure to the northern neighbor takes place on a massive scale. A quarter of the Mexican adult population has visited or lived in the United States, and 60 percent have a relative living there. Roughly eleven million Mexicans, representing 11 percent of Mexico's population, lived in the United States in 2005. An estimated 400,000 more Mexicans join the net U.S. population each year.

Fig. 1: Mexican Emigrants to the United States as a Percentage of the Mexican Population, 1900-2005



Source: Calculated from U.S. and Mexican Census data taken from the Mexican Migration Project NATLHIST file 2002 (http://mmp.opr.princeton.edu) and CONAPO 2006

Mexicans are by far the largest nationality of immigrants in the United States. The Mexico-born represented 30 percent of the total foreign-born population of the United States in 2002, including 21 percent of the legal immigrants and an estimated 57 percent of the unauthorized.⁸ The 25 million people of Mexican origin in the United States in 2002, including both native and foreign-born, amounted to 8.7 percent of the U.S. population.⁹

How has the migration profile changed in recent years?

Migration from Mexico to the United States in recent years has become more diverse in its geographic origins within Mexico, more dispersed in its U.S. geographic destinations, and more permanent.

Diversification within Mexico

The Central West plateau in Mexico has been the primary source of emigration for the past century. Even in 2003, a third of the Mexicans in the United States were born in just three adjacent states: Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato. In relative terms, the highest levels of emigration are from the states of Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Nayarit, and Durango in the same region. Since the 1990s, however, emigration has touched almost the entire country. The 2000 census found migration or the receipt of remittances in 96 percent of the country's 2443 *municipios* (counties). Emigration from the south and the central region around Mexico City increased from 22 percent of the national total in 1990 to 30 percent in 2005. The eastern state of Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico has become an important source region for the first time.

Dispersion within the United States

The Mexican-born population of the United States has become increasingly dispersed. The national share of Mexican

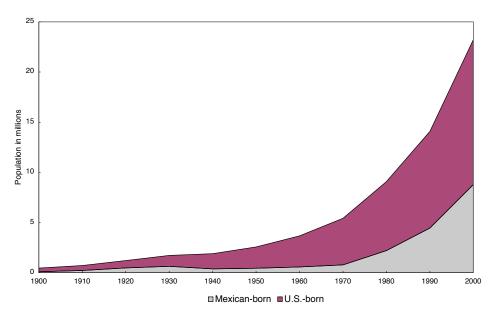
immigrants living in California, Texas, Illinois, and Arizona fell from 89 percent in 1990 to 72 percent in 2002.13 Although California remains the primary destination by far, with 42.8 percent of the Mexican-born population, the Southeast and New York have emerged as major destinations for the first time. Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina are now among the top ten destination states.14 Dispersal is being driven in large part by the high cost of living in traditional destinations and the availability of work in the Southeast and Midwest's poultry and meat processing, light manufacturing, and construction industries. Although wages are lower in the Southeast and Midwest than in California, the high cost of housing in California and the saturation of low-skilled labor markets are making it a relatively less-attractive destination.

Permanent settlement

Through the 1960s, Mexican migration to the United States was dominated by the circular migration of men who returned regularly to their hometowns in Mexico. Since then, a secu-

lar trend towards settlement and whole-family migration has emerged. Although Mexicans continue to dominate agricultural labor in the Southwest, most Mexicans have left seasonal work and are employed in a widening range of economic sectors, particularly in the low-skilled service industries and construction. These jobs are decreasingly seasonal, as even highly-capitalized agriculture requires permanent crews to maintain equipment and perform other tasks.

Fig. 2: "Mexicans" in the United States by Place of Birth, 1900-2000



Source: www.conapo.gob.mx

U.S. immigration policy has given another major push to settlement, sometimes inadvertently. The 1986 U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) sharply accelerated a trend towards permanent settlement by legalizing 2.3 million Mexicans. The newly legalized then sponsored the legal immigration of their family members or paid the smuggling fees for their entry. Women averaged just under half of authorized Mexican migrants both before and after the 1986 IRCA legislation, but they have become an increasing share of the unauthorized migration flow. Women constituted a quarter of unauthorized Mexicans before IRCA and a third afterwards. Escalation of U.S. border enforcement since 1993 has also contributed to long-term Mexican settlement in the United States by raising the people-smuggling costs and physical risks of making multiple unauthorized entries.

Other immigration policies and politics in the United States have contributed to the settlement trend by encouraging naturalization. Historically, Mexicans have been among the national-origin group in the United States least likely to naturalize, given high levels of circularity and temporary migration and a political culture that views U.S. naturalization as a quasitraitorous rejection of Mexico. In 1995, 19 percent of eligible Mexican immigrants naturalized compared to 66 percent of Europeans and 56 percent of Asians. By 2001, more than a third of eligible Mexican immigrants were naturalizing.¹⁷ The increase is a reaction to the anti-immigrant U.S. political climate in the mid-1990s yielding California's 1994 Proposition 187, which would have denied a range of social benefits to unauthorized migrants had it not been overturned by the courts; the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act easing deportations of legal residents who had committed a broadened range of crimes; and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act limiting welfare benefits for noncitizens. Mexicans have naturalized to protect themselves from the growing practical

distinction between being a legal resident and citizen.

Irregular Migration

The Border Patrol began an intensive buildup of agents and control infrastructure along the border with Operation "Hold the Line" in El Paso, Texas, in 1993 and Operation "Gatekeeper" in San Diego, California, in 1994. The border enforcement budget increased 600 percent from 1993 to 2006, allowing the Border Patrol to increase its number of agents from about 4000 to 12,350 over the same period. New fencing and sophisticated surveillance systems have been added to the border amid enthusiasm for increased enforcement from both Republicans and Democrats in Congress.18 The "Minutemen" vigilante

group has also conducted widely publicized efforts on small stretches of the border since 2005 to make a symbolic stance against illegal migration by reporting unauthorized crossers to the Border Patrol.

There is strong evidence that the major effect of enforcement efforts has not been to deter unauthorized migrants, but rather, to unleash a series of unintended consequences. The fees migrants pay coyotes (people smugglers) have increased from several hundred dollars to about \$2500 as mom-and-pop coyote operations have become sophisticated networks of operatives on both sides of the border using safe houses, tunnels, falsified papers, and other expensive techniques to move their clients. Concentrated border enforcement in urban areas has indirectly caused the death of an average of one migrant a day as entrants seek to circumvent these fortifications by crossing wilderness areas and rivers and canals with an elevated risk of dying from exposure or drowning. The greatest paradox is that the border policy has bottled up unauthorized migrants in the United States once they have crossed. Unauthorized migrants are increasingly likely to stay in the United States for long periods to pay off the debts they incurred to coyotes and avoid the physical risks and high costs of multiple border crossings. The Department of Homeland Security estimates that between 2000 and 2006, the number of unauthorized Mexican immigrants grew from 4.7 to 6.6 million.19 Studies conducted in source communities tell the same story of failed deterrence. Among migrants interviewed in a 2005 survey of a traditional migrant sending community in the state of Jalisco, 92 percent of those who were apprehended at least once on their most recent trip to the border eventually were able to gain entry, without returning to their place of origin. Among those interviewed in a 2006 survey in a rural community in the state of Yucatán, 97 percent of those apprehended on their most recent trip were able to enter successfully on the second or third try.20

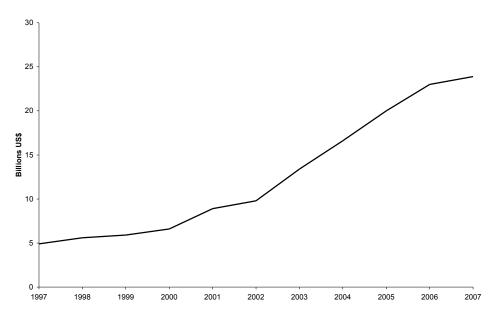
State Policies

The Mexican Stance

The 1974 Mexican General Law of Population requires departing labor migrants to present themselves to Mexican migration authorities, show a work contract authorized by the destination country consulate, and provide proof that they meet the entry requirements of the destination country. Yet Mexican officials have claimed they cannot deter emigrants with coercion given the 1917 Constitution's establishment of a right to exit the country, though that right is qualified within the constitution and, at previous periods in Mexican history, the government strongly discouraged emigration, even briefly using force to try to stop migrants from leaving without authorization during the Bracero program.

Former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) made a migration accord with the United States a pillar of his foreign policy. A fundamental philosophical shift has taken place in the Secretariat of Foreign Relations (SRE) away from the "policy of no policy," in which Mexican authorities long turned a blind eye to massive unauthorized migration across its northern border, to a more active stance. Mexican officials do not want to repeat their lack of involvement in U.S. legislation like IRCA, whose debate they did not participate in based on the premise that Mexican intervention in sovereign U.S. policymaking would legitimate U.S. interventions in Mexican politics. High-level bilateral meetings in 2001, including a presidential meeting in Washington, DC on September 7, 2001, centered on the design of a new temporary-worker program, an increase in the number of visas issued to Mexicans, and regularization of unauthorized migrants in the United States. Four days later, the 9/11 attacks derailed the bilateral talks.21 President Felipe Calderón (2006-present) has downplayed his predecessor's vocal expectations of a bilateral migration accord but is clearly interested in the same goal of legalized flows.

Figure 3: Remittances to Mexico, 1997-2007



Source: Banco de México

The U.S. Stance

In 2004, President George W. Bush announced a unilateral plan for dealing with unauthorized immigration. Although the plan was not meant to establish an accord with Mexico, any changes in U.S. law would disproportionately affect Mexico, since Mexicans account for more than half of the unauthorized immigrant population. The Bush proposal eventually evolved into the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007, which failed to pass the Senate in June 2007. The bill would have provided a path to legalization for most of the unauthorized already living in the United States; increased spending on border enforcement and workplace inspections; established a new temporary-worker program; and created a Canadian-style "point system" for selecting immigrants in a way that would favor the highly skilled.

Within these parameters, policy-makers have considered several major questions to be resolved in a comprehensive immigration reform:

- Should reform be designed and executed as unilateral U.S.
 policy or as a bilateral accord with Mexico? If the policy is
 unilateral, should it treat Mexicans the same as any other nationality, or give Mexicans special consideration, given their
 country's historic ties with the United States and membership in NAFTA?
- Should unauthorized migrants living in the United States have a path to become legal residents and /or citizens? If so, what should be the required period of residence, English-speaking ability, level of fees, and requirements to leave the United States before legalizing?
- What kinds of employer sanctions for hiring unauthorized workers, databases for identifying eligible workers, and enforcement strategies should be developed without elevating the risk of discrimination against authorized Latinos or foreigners?
- Should there be a new temporary-worker program or simply a
 - revision of existing temporary-worker programs? How many times should temporary-worker visas be renewable, and should they offer the holders the possibility of eventually becoming a citizen? Should the visas be portable among different employers; what incentives for migrants to return to their home country should be developed, what labor rights should temporary workers have, and what provisions should be made for family reunification?
 - What border enforcement measures should be in place?

Mexico's Embrace of Emigrants

Most areas of the Mexican political spectrum are now in agreement, at least publicly, that Mexicans outside the country should be included in Mexican political life. In his 1995-2000 National Development Plan, President Ernesto Zedillo declared, "the Mexican

nation extends beyond the territory contained within its borders." These were not irredentist claims, but rather discursive moves seeking the resources of Mexicans in the United States. Remittances increased from US\$4.9 billion in 1997 to US\$23.9 billion in 2007. Remittances are now Mexico's second largest source of foreign income after petroleum, though the pace of remittance growth has slowed as immigrants increasingly settle in the United States and after the U.S. economy slowdown in 2008, particularly in the construction sector in which Mexicans are over-represented, proportionally.

Since 1989, the government's *Paisano* program has tried to ease the return of vacationing migrants by cracking down on police who extort returnees. Mexican consulates began to pay more attention to legal protections of Mexican nationals in the United States, particularly the 50 or so Mexican nationals on Death Row, and the human rights of unauthorized border crossers. The 46 Mexican consulates in the United States are promoting a *matrícula consular* identification document that is of greatest use to unauthorized migrants without a Mexican passport. There has been an intense debate in the United States about whether the *matrícula* should be accepted as a legitimate identification document allowing the bearer to open a U.S. bank account, board a commercial flight, or prove identity to U.S. police.

The Mexican Congress further attempted to integrate nationals abroad by changing the constitution in 1997 to allow Mexicans who naturalize abroad and the children of Mexicans born abroad to claim Mexican nationality. People with dual nationality can buy property along the coast and border, which are restricted zones for foreigners, but strictly speaking, they do not have dual citizenship. Most importantly, dual nationals cannot vote in Mexican elections.²²

The Mexican government also institutionalized ties with emigrants through the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (PCME). Since 1990, the PCME has built on existing efforts by migrants and local priests to organize based on their Mexican hometowns. The PCME creates formal ties between the clubs and the Mexican government at the federal, state, and county levels. These relationships are the basis for matching funds programs like *Tres por Uno* (3x1), in which migrants and Mexican government agencies jointly develop infrastructure projects in migrants' places of origin. By 2005, the program was spending US\$80 million a year with a quarter of the funding coming directly from migrants.²³

The major emigrant initiatives survived the change in administration in 2000. One of President Fox's first official acts in 2000 was to inaugurate a Presidential Office for Communities Abroad directed by Juan Hernández, a dual national literature professor born in Texas. The cabinet level position was abolished in 2002 after conflicts with Jorge Castañeda, Secretary of Foreign Relations, over how to manage two cabinet agencies simultaneously conducting foreign policy. In 2003, the PCME and the presidential office were folded into the new Institute for Mexicans Abroad (IME), which includes an advisory council comprised of 105 Mexican community leaders and ten Latino organizations in the United States, 10 special advisors, and representatives of each of the 32 state governments in Mexico.²⁴

In 2006, Mexicans abroad voted in their presidential election by absentee ballot for the first time. Three million Mexicans in the United States were eligible to vote, but only 57,000 tried to register to vote and less than 33,000 cast valid ballots. Fiftyeight percent voted for the candidate of the incumbent National Action Party (PAN).

Challenges and Future Developments

Demographic changes

Mexican government demographers anticipate that pressure to emigrate will lessen as relatively fewer young people enter the workforce in coming years. Demographic growth in Mexico slowed dramatically from 3.5 percent annual growth in 1965 to 0.89 in 2006. Mexican women are having far fewer children. The total fertility rate declined from 7.2 in 1960 to 2.3 in 2003. The National Population Council estimates that the rate of growth of the working age population (ages 15-59) is slowing and that it will begin to shrink in 2027. Nevertheless, a quarter of the working age population remains underemployed. Given the likely persistence of a large wage differential and the embeddedness of migrants' social networks, less demographic pressure is unlikely by itself to seriously reduce migration.

US policies towards Mexican immigration

The two major presumptive American presidential candidates, Senators Barack Obama (Democrat-Illinois) and John McCain (Republican-Arizona) have similar stances on immigration policy. McCain was one of the sponsors of the failed 2007 comprehensive reform bill, which was also supported by Obama. The major difference between the candidates is that during the 2008 Republican primary campaign, McCain moved toward the right by emphasizing increased border enforcement before a legalization program or increase in temporary migrants would be put into place. McCain has been a strong supporter of NAFTA, whereas Obama criticized the agreement while campaigning in northern industrial states where many workers feel that they have been hurt by competition with Mexico. Obama has pledged that if he is elected, he will try to negotiate bilateral labor and environmental side agreements to NAFTA. While any changes to NAFTA could only take place with Mexico's cooperation, history indicates that the Mexican government's role in managing emigration will continue to be primarily reactive to U.S. policy.

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