

Some Aspects of the European Union's Policy towards Central Asia

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Abstract

This article examines the political framework of the European Union (EU)-Central Asian relations. The goal of the research is to analyze the priorities of the EU policy towards Central Asia. This article identifies common features of internal political transformation processes, foreign policy orientations of Central Asian countries, and analyzes the EU strategy toward the region, examines the goals and objectives of the national and the EU strategic documents, identifies the matching objectives of the EU and Central Asian countries, and describes the mechanisms and policy instruments used to implement the policy in the region. The main outcome of the current research is the correspondence of the objectives of the EU strategy with national goals of the countries.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional policy, geopolitics

1. Introduction

There are five independent Central Asian countries, which appeared on the world political scene after the collapse of the USSR: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Since gaining independence those countries have started to receive an increase in attention from the world's leading political players such as Russia, the US, the EU, China, also Iran, India, Turkey and Pakistan. Gradually Central Asia became a strategically important region, where the interests of different countries cross.

The importance of Central Asian countries in international relations is determined by their geopolitical position, the presence of significant natural resources and security issues in the region. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the countries in the region have gained strategic importance related to the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan (Belokrenitsky, 2000; Kazantsev, 2014). Also geographical proximity with Pakistan and Iran gives Central Asia a greater level of importance.

Given the above mentioned factors, Central Asian countries have become the object of policies of the various regional and international organizations. This article examines the lessons and perspectives from the regional policy of the European Union (EU) toward Central Asian countries. Relevance of current research investigation is justified by growing interest and increased activities of the European Union in Central Asia. The article studies strategic objectives, main directions and priorities of the European Union policy for Central Asia, and their main instruments and mechanisms of policy implementation to strengthen its role and influence in the region.

The first chapter provides a theoretical and methodological foundation for national model of each Central Asian country. The second chapter analyses the domestic political framework of the Central Asian countries. It introduces the causes of the world's attention on ongoing development policies in Central Asia in its historical context, and highlights the reasons for the cooperation of the European Union in the region, and also makes a brief reference to the political environment underlying the socio-economic situation in the last decade. The third chapter describes and assesses the European Union's policy toward Central Asia. This evaluation is intended to identify the challenges facing the European Union, in order to analyse the perspective of the European regional integration on the Central Asian countries. The fourth chapter analyses and evaluates economic and security policies and strategies of the different areas of cooperation within the foreign political framework of the Central Asian countries to reveal the possibilities for influence from the European Union. The last section of the article provides a discussion and a conclusion on the topic.

1.1 A Theoretical and Methodological Foundation for National Model of the Central Asian Countries

On the eve of the 21st century the Central Asian countries became independent republics and began to cardinaly transform the direction of their development. The countries have started to implement radical socio-economic and political transformations, and have begun their transitions to a market economy

The first discussion on the necessity to develop a model of socio-economic development started in the second half of the twentieth century, when many Third World countries gained independence and started the process of national state building (Krieger, 2000). The second half of the eighties and early nineties became the period of the search for new and more effective forms of organization of social relations (Knox, Agnew, & McCarthy, 2008; Dicken, 2011). This period became important for newly independent states as it was the beginning of formation of market relations in those countries. During this period the central planned economy of the USSR collapsed. Newly independent countries of the ex-Soviet union faced the many challenges of the transformation process.

At that time there were three basic economic models: capitalist, socialist and social orientation. At the end of the twentieth century it was clear that there was no country that could be easily put into a tight framework of the adopted postulates within those economic models (Adamcova, 2006). Thus, the countries continue to further seek their own development path.

The Figure 1 presents the historical development of the basic models for the national policies. The foundation for the globalization of the capitalist system became the market economy model. With emergence of the Keynesian model, which was present in capitalist countries, coexisted the command economy model. This model was known as the central planned economy of the totalitarian states. The model was implemented not only by the socialist camp headed by the Soviet Union, but also by the countries from the capitalist system. The elements of the centrally planned economy of the military – feudal system were rarely present in Japan; the same model was assumed in Germany (Pogorleckij, 2001).

It is important to mention that the Soviet Union possesses rich natural and human resources as well as high qualified human capital (Blank, 1995; Ulyanov, 1999). However, the economic growth was low and did not lead to incentives and motivation to work. Overall, the system was deformed by the social psychology of the population and created a favourable environment for '*parasitism*' (Romanov, 2012). The incompetence of the system of central control because obvious because it started to collapse, since it was not able to provide new initiatives to develop the economy and solve social problems. The social, economic, and ecological situation of the regions of the Soviet Union was catastrophic and lagging behind the leading countries in the East and West (Suzdaltsev, 2007, 2011; Lunev, 2006; Vardomsky, 2003, 2009). The socialist system collapsed in such a way that it was necessary to completely rebuild on the principles existing in sophisticated world civilizations.

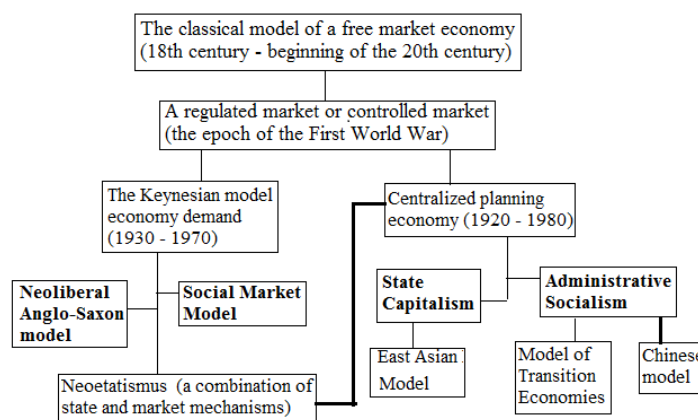


Figure 1. Evolution of basic models of economic development

Source: Pogorletskiy A. I.: "Economy of foreign countries", "Mikhailov", St. Petersburg, 2001, pp. 110-114

1.2 Trends in Internal Transformation of the Central Asia Republics

The Central Asian countries did not pursue independent domestic policies as they were parts of the integrated political and economic system of the USSR. The countries were a part of a single economic space and their economies were mainly raw material orientated towards the Soviet economy. Infrastructure and production capacities of the countries were developed to serve the USSR domestic market. However, the resource potential of the Central Asian countries was not fully explored during those times.

After the collapse of the USSR and gaining independence, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were able to choose their own domestic and foreign political development. However during the years of nationhood building the countries faced many difficulties of the transformation process. The newly

independent Central Asian republics had to develop their own independent economic policies and move from administrative-command systems to market economies.

The fall of the Soviet Union led to the collapse of the whole economic structure of the region. The Central Asian countries faced systemic crises that impacted their socio-economic development. The most difficult socio-economic situations occurred in the republics that did not have oil and gas reserves. The confrontation between the rival political factions in Tajikistan caused the conflict that grew into civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1997 (Zvyagelskaya, 2009, 2007). Social unrest that occurred in 2005 in the Uzbek city of Andijan influenced the political processes in the country. Armed rebellion that captured a number of administrative buildings was crushed by the Uzbek authorities. The events in Andijan received the negative assessment from the human rights Non-Governmental Organizations, as well as political opposition. The Western media accused the government forces of Uzbekistan of the use of force against civil demonstrators that protested against the severe socio-economic situation in the country (Kazantsev, 2014). A difficult socio-economic situation in Kyrgyzstan led to the rise of protest in the society. The reason for the revolt or so called 'Tulip Revolution' was the opposition disagreement in March 2005 that led to an unconstitutional change of power in Kyrgyzstan. The political event caused the mass unrest, disturbances and seizures of administrative buildings (Kazantsev, 2014).

The economic downturns in the Central Asian countries have led to poverty and backwardness of the regions. Some of the regional countries remain the poorest in the former Soviet Union. For example, according to the World Bank statistics (2013), 60% of Tajikistan's population lived below the poverty line in 2000. Those figures decreased only by 15% by the year 2013. The GDP per capita in Tajikistan is \$ 870 US per year. In Kyrgyzstan, population more than 40% of the population lived below the poverty line in 2000. By the year 2013 the poverty decreased only by 3,2%. Today the GDP per capita in Kyrgyzstan is \$ 920 US per year.

During the period of transformation the republics had to develop and adopt their own constitutions, demographic reforms, and the presidential and parliamentary elections. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan adopted their constitutions in 1992, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1993, and Tajikistan in 1994. The constitution of each country declares them as a 'secular, legal, free and democratic state', as well as were established the principles of 'respect for the human rights and freedom for individual', 'separation of power into legislative, executive and judicial' and 'market economy'.

The common feature of the political development for the Central Asian region during the decade of independence was the relative stability of the political elite that was formed during the Soviet period.

The presence of 'political clans' had a great impact on the internal policies of the regional countries. Those political clans are the most powerful and influential tribal groups. The regional and tribal division of the society of Central Asia is given by the historical traditions, structure of public relations and mentality (Omarov, 2008; Zvyagelskaya, 2009)

The same time, for the newly independent republics of Central Asia raised the question of the relations between the government and Islam. In recent years the nationhood development of those countries has been accompanied by the intensified process of revival of Islam in the region. Even though newly independent republics maintain the secular character of the state power and prevent politicization of religion, Islam became an element of government identity and one of the tools, which was used by the government leaders to develop independent countries. Besides, Zvyagelskaya I. (2009) argues that Islam played an important role in foreign policy of the region. It allowed the Central Asian countries to become members of the Organization of Islamic Conference, and facilitated the bilateral relations with other regional actors, like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, other groups started to use the religion to Islamize their societies and their nations. The revival of Islam in the region happened through the increased influence of Islamic organizations. The growing authoritarianism regimes, socio-economic crises, and poverty contributed to the popularity of the radical Islamic groups among the population in the countries (Ignatenko, 2001).

During the first decade of independence the Central Asian countries formally built the democratic institutions and the foundation of the market economy. However, the above mentioned factors prevented the true liberalization of the political and economic regimes in Central Asia. The political power started to concentrate in the hands of the leaders of the countries, the coterie of politicians around them and stable clan relationships. Thus, in the region formed a regime of 'managed democracy' instead of a democratic political system.

The Central Asian countries chose different models of transition to a market economy; Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan hold the general economic liberalization, while Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan conducted more restrained market reforms with a large share of state regulation in the economy. Overall, the poor

organization of the economic reforms and absence in their structure led to various socio-economic problems in the region that raised concerns of international organizations about the security in the region, and at the same time created the opportunity for cooperation in the region.

1.3 Policy Priorities of the European Union in Central Asia

The key objective of the policy of the European Parliament toward the Central Asian countries is to promote political and economic transformation to Western models of democracy and to market based economies. According to the European Neighbourhood Policy, the level of cooperation and the volume of European aid to the country will depend on the level of *commitments to political, economic, trade, or human rights reform in a country*.

The EU developed a program of Technical Assistance of the Common Independent States (TACIS) in 1993 that was aimed to support political and economic reforms in the Central Asian countries. The priority direction within the program was *to develop effectively-functioning market economies based on private ownership and initiative*, with the main goals *‘to develop local skills and know-how required to accelerate economic reforms and to encourage conditions favorable to private investment and the development of the private sector* (Unspecified, 1993).

Since 2007 the TACIS Program has been replaced for the CA countries by the following strategic documents: “European Union and Central Asia: The New Partnership in Action” and “Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia 2007-2013”. All projects implemented by the EU and EU Member States in the Central Asian region have bilateral and multilateral bases and formally are considered to be components of the strategic documents. The EU strategy in Central Asia is based on the principles set out in the Declaration of the United Nation “Millennium Challenges” and the EU Security Strategy of 2003. The Strategy can be considered as a comprehensive program of EU cooperation in Central Asia. And the actions within the Strategy framework are not a substitute for the legal basis of bilateral relations laid by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with regional countries (EC, 2007).

The European Council has provided three reports on the implementation of the Strategy to the European Commission and the European Parliament in 2008, 2010 and 2012. The reports gave a positive assessment of the work done by the EU in previous years, and became a foundation for renewing the Development Cooperation Instrument under the multiannual financial framework for 2014-2020.

The new program is based on experience gained from the last decade of cooperation in the region and geopolitical changes which occurred during the last five years.

The results from the cooperation of the EU in Central Asia since 1993 have shown that external threats of instability and insecurity in the region are hypothetical. Interregional conflicts in Central Asian countries had virtually no impact on the migration situation in the EU, especially in comparison with the consequences of the Arab Spring (Ergeshbayev, 2006; Kumskov, 2002; Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). In addition, the EU should not be so concerned about drug-traffic from Central Asia as to Russia. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Central Asia, up to 90 tons of heroin are smuggled to Central Asia from Afghanistan, annually of which 75-80 tons goes to Russia. Heroin is delivered to the EU through Turkmenistan and the volume is 8-9 times less [UNODC, 2012, p.48]. However, the EU continues to support further strengthening of the national polices of Central Asian countries in drug demand reduction and in combating illegal drugs supply, and related organized crime within the framework of “The EU-Central Asian Action Plan on Drugs 2014-2020” (EC, 2014; Philippe & Christine, 2012).

The EU interest in the energy security is given by a high degree of politicization of the issue. Today, the import diversification of oil and gas has become less acute for the EU as it was during the period of peak oil prices. The European Commission does not expect the growth of energy consumption and stimulation of the development of alternative and nuclear energy. The prospect of significant U.S. Liquefied natural gas (LNG) export has led to changes in the energy market in Europe (Ratner, 2013, p. 23). In 2011, LNG comprised almost 20% of the EU’s natural gas import (Belkin, 2013, p. 3). Today the EU is considering building (LNG) import terminals to diversify its sources of natural gas. Despite those circumstances, the Commission confirms the interest in the construction of a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline.

The main achievement of the Strategy in the region, the EU considers the strengthening of the political dialogues between the two regions (Progress Report, 2012, p. 9). The main tasks of those political dialogues are to *‘strengthen political relations with the EU’, ‘to support political and economic reforms’, ‘to ensure security and stability’, and ‘to promote new forms of cooperation between’* (EC, 2009).

Every year there are meetings held at the Foreign Ministry level and senior officials of the European Commission in Central Asian capitals and in Brussels (EC 2009). This form of interaction was introduced during implementation of the EU Strategy for 2007-2013 and has complimented the mechanism of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). It can be expected that during the new Strategy for 2014-2020, instead of a ministerial format or in addition to it, the EU will propose to hold regular summits of EU-Central Asia.

The EU has fulfilled its goal within TASIC framework to set up offices in regional countries and expand the network embassies of European countries. In 2007, only Germany had embassies in all five countries of Central Asia and the office of the European Commission's Delegation was only in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The first representation of the European Commission was opened in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in 2007, the EC office in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) received full-scale status in 2010. During the I. Karimov visit to Brussels in 2011 the EC's office was opened in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) in 2012.

The terms of trade within the EU strategy in Central Asia envisaged a mutual regime of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) that is free of quantitative restrictions and as possibilities of application of protective measures in case of threats to domestic producers and anti-dumping measures. Also the PCA provides the European companies with the regime of MFN, that allows them to select the most favourable existing regime for the 'establishment and operation' in the Central Asian region and non-application of the new and less-favourable legislation to the European companies during the first three years of its existence.

Also the strategy consolidated the agreed not to interfere in the currency regulation with exception of emergent cases. The regulations of business activities within the EU-Central Asia Strategy enabled European companies to place their companies on the territories of Central Asian countries. Thereby, the EU extended its economic presence in the region and ensured the implementation procedures of the economic reforms.

The European Commission also carries out an economic aid to the Central Asian countries through European financial institutions such as the European Bank for the Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB). In 2006 the memorandum of understanding was signed between the European communion, the EBRD and the EIB on the coordination of the Central Asian policy to enhance the effectiveness of the policy in the region. In 2008 the Council approved the proposal of the European Commission to extend the activities of the EIB in Central Asia, which in fact means the strengthening of the financial instrument of EU influence in the region. The EIB and EBRD in Central Asia mainly focus on energy and transport projects (Barysh, 2012).

The implementation of the European projects in CA countries does not always bring expected results. For example, in Kazakhstan the project of the "National Human Rights Action Plan for the period 2009-2012" has been completed only by 23% (Vorkova & Jamankulova, 2013). There have been numerous delays during the implementation of the Southern Corridor project since 2009 (Barysch, 2013). Also, the second EU-Central Asia Action Plan on Drugs for 2009-2013 (EC, 2014) has not brought expected results (UNODC, 2012).

The low performance of some of the projects conducted in the region is directly related to the peculiarities of the CA region (Gregory, 2000). However, overall the cooperation is beneficial for the political, economic and social development of those countries, because the idea of all ongoing European projects correspond with priority direction that had been chosen in the initial stage of Central Asian national hood development to create a 'secular, legal, free and democratic state' that respects the principles of 'respect for the human rights and freedom for individual', and 'separation of power into legislative, executive and judicial' and 'market economy' (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Constitution of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Constitution of the Republic of Turkmenistan).

The Strategy of the European Union in the Central Asian region for the period 2007-2013 has fulfilled its main objectives to reinforce the EU presence in the region and to gain the solidarity of the Central Asian countries in cooperation in mutual goals to keep security and prosperity in the continent.

1.4 Foreign Policy of Central Asia and Its Economic Integration into the Global Economic System

In Central Asia there is a concentrated abundance of natural resources, especially hydrocarbons. For today, natural resources are the primary factor for national development of the Central Asian republics. The natural resources became one of the main instruments of foreign policy. Three of the five Central Asian countries have significant reserves of energy resources, for example, according to oil and natural gas reserves Kazakhstan is among the ten leading countries. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan possess mainly natural gas reserves, which are considered to be the eighth and fifth largest in the world, respectively. Gas reserved in the region is divided between Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Natural gas export is delivered to the West by Soviet

pipelines 'Central Asia-Center' and 'Bukhara-Ural'. Most of its oil exports, Kazakhstan sends by Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) 'Tengiz-Novorossiysk' that were built during the Soviet period also.

Central Asian countries have a strategic geopolitical position in the region. Despite large distances and low population densities in some of those countries, geographical location of Central Asia has transit potential that creates opportunities for communication between East-West and North-South regions (EC, 2009). On the other hand, the proximity of the Central Asian countries to Afghanistan creates transit routes for Afghan drug production to Russia and Europe, the so-called 'northern route'.

The ruling elite of the Central Asian republic realized that creating favorable external conditions will contribute to solving the problems within the economy that greatly arose during the first decade of their independence. The common feature for all five Central Asian countries was aspiration to diversify external relations to expand the space for political maneuvering and strengthen its sovereignty. In March 1992 all five members of Central Asian countries were admitted to the United Nations. In January 1992 the countries became members of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE/OSCE). Moreover, the same year the countries joined the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and other organizations (EC, 2014).

The priority for all regional countries remains the cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The economic cooperation prevailing in the CIS region is the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), which was established in October 2000. The member countries of EurAsEC, are Russia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tadjikistan, and Uzbekistan. The Central Asian countries had attempted to establish their own economic cooperation. The Organization for 'Central Asian Cooperation' was established in 2002, however has not attained significant results.

In 1992 all Central Asian republics, except for Turkmenistan signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST) for the next five years, with the possibility of automatic extension. In 2002 the Treaty was converted into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and became one of the leading forms of cooperation in the security field. The members of CSTO are Armenia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian, and Tajikistan. Its foundation became the negotiations on the border issues between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tadjikistan. In 1996 was held the meeting in Shanghai, where the abovementioned countries signed the agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area.

The formation of the independent Central Asian foreign policies occurred through the integration into the global political and economic organizations. The membership of the regional countries as independent entities in international organizations, such as the European Union, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE/OSCE), and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) creates opportunities for influence in the region. All countries in the Central Asian region conduct 'multi-vector' foreign policy orientation, which was determined by the search of partners ready to assist them in their economic, political and security development.

2. Discussion

The main outcome of the working paper is based on the fact that to implement the economic policy is always difficult, and requires understanding of all aspects of economic and geopolitical development in the region. Those external geopolitical factors influence the chosen path of economic and political reforms, especially when the countries are in a transition stage and located in the region of the 'Great Game' of world powers. At the same time, it was necessary for Central Asian republics to develop their own model of market transformation and find their role in the world community. And in addition to the above-mentioned factors, market reforms must be based on market relations, taking into account the historical heritage of the totalitarian regime and lifestyle, traditions and mentality of Central Asian nations, and what is particularly important there is a great need to solve urgent social problems that were accumulated since the collapse of the USSR.

In the environment of the complex political and ethnic map of Central Asia, stabilization is possible through external control over the region. Currently there is a confrontation on the diplomatic and economic fronts between the world powers, such as Russia, China, the EU, and the USA, about who will execute the control over the region. The EU cannot afford to stay aside from geopolitical influence in the region, as it would allow them to establish relations with other great players in the region. Some steps in this direction have already been taken. The EU participates in many infrastructure, oil and gas projects in Central Asia. Those projects can provide alternative resources and markets in case of the next turbulence at the political level between the countries' leaders, and hence those projects are becoming another tool for establishing global control in the region.

It may be expected that the European projects in the Central Asia region will give both the EU and the regional countries quite tangible economic benefits, and will strengthen their political position on the world stage. However, the implementation of such projects so far was prevented by the unresolved ethnic and territorial conflicts, and bureaucratic and undemocratic procedures in Central Asia.

3. Conclusion

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, five Central Asian republics have been going through the process of nation-building, establishment of an independent domestic and foreign policy and development concept of national security. Despite the fact that each country of Central Asia has chosen its own direction of political, economic and social development, the internal development of those countries had many common features. Firstly, the regional and clan divisions played an important role in the development of domestic policy of all countries. Second, the existence of political elites formed during the Soviet period. And the third common feature for all five countries is a growth in presidential power at the beginning of the 2000s. The CA region has never experienced genuine liberalization of political systems. In the region formed a regime of 'managed democracy' instead of a democratic political system.

The formation of the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries was largely conditioned by the accession to the different regional and international organizations. The countries have chosen various degrees of "multi-vector" policy-oriented cooperation with various foreign partners, which in terms creates the space for political maneuvering and strengthening its sovereignty. On the other hand 'multi-vector' foreign policy orientation was determined by the search for partners ready to assist them in their economic, political and security development.

The positive results of the Implementation Reports of the EU strategy in Central Asia in 2008, 2010 and 2012, became a foundation for the new strategy for the cooperation in the region for the period 2014-2020. It must be noted some difficulties in the implementation of certain projects within the strategy of "European Union and Central Asia: The New Partnership in Action" and "Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia", such as the program of "The National Human Rights Action Plan", numerous delays during implementation of the Southern Corridor, as well as weak results of the program of the "EU-Central Asia Action Plan on Drugs for 2009-2013", and many others. However, the process of project implementation directly linked to complex social and political interactions within the region. Overall the regional integration is a perspective for the Central Asian countries, as the idea of all ongoing European projects and programs correspond with the national goals of those countries, to develop free and democratic countries.

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