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‘Perspectives on the EU’s role in the Eastern Neighbourhood: Security, Democracy, and the Rule of Law’

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Introduction:

The process of European Union (EU) enlargement has been a topic of great significance and interest, both for the aspiring candidate states and the EU itself. The expansion of the EU brings about various opportunities and challenges. In this context, Georgia, as a country situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, plays an important role in exploring its prospects for EU candidacy and navigating its relationships with these neighboring initiatives.

This paper will discuss several key aspects pertaining to EU enlargement, Georgia's aspirations for EU candidacy, and the interconnectedness with other regional initiatives. It will examine the readiness of Georgia to become an EU candidate state, the necessary steps to realize this goal and the benefits of an expedited enlargement to Ukraine and Moldova. Additionally, it will analyze the unique circumstances of the Balkans region, including the Western Balkan countries, and their pursuit of EU membership within the framework of regional dynamics and historical complexities. By exploring these topics, we can gain insights into the complex dynamics of EU enlargement and the role of Georgia in shaping its future within the European integration framework.

1. What is the current ‘state of play’ in EU enlargement policy and what barriers lay in the way of the Western Balkans’ enlargement?

1.1 Democratic stagnation in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans region is experiencing democratic stagnation, with limited improvements or setbacks in terms of democratic governance. Serbia, in particular, witnessed a downgrade from "free" to "partly free" by Freedom House in 2019. Despite ongoing EU accession negotiations since 2014, these talks have had little impact on the country's domestic trajectory. The recent elections in Serbia resulted in President Aleksandar Vučić securing another term, indicating his continued dominance over the political system.

1.2 Lingering war wounds and unresolved conflicts

The Western Balkans region continues to grapple with the aftermath of conflicts since the end of the Cold War. The Dayton peace accord in Bosnia and Herzegovina is unraveling, the Kosovo-Serbia dispute remains unresolved, Montenegro has experienced violent unrest, and North Macedonia has not yet begun accession negotiations. To foster regional stability and integration, the EU should engage in diplomatic efforts and provide nearer-term prospects for closer political and economic integration. However, influential member states and the EU as a whole remain ambivalent about accepting new members or taking significant steps toward deeper integration.

1.3 Rule of law concerns

The absence of the rule of law in the Western Balkans poses a significant impediment to enlargement. The rule of law is a fundamental aspect of the EU's legal framework and a requirement for membership. Corruption, lack of judicial independence, inadequate human rights protection, and weak legal systems are indicators of the rule of law deficit. These issues not only hinder economic development and investment in the region but also make countries more susceptible to organized crime and other security threats. Efforts are being made by the EU to address the rule of law deficit in the Western Balkans through financial and technical assistance. However, it ultimately falls upon the candidate countries to take responsibility for implementing necessary reforms and upholding the rule of law.

1.4 Unsolved conflicts as a barrier

Unsolved conflict (Kosovo-Serbia) in the Western Balkans present a significant obstacle to EU enlargement. These conflicts have intensified racial tensions, political instability, and economic uncertainty in the region, making full integration into the EU challenging. The EU emphasizes that resolving these disputes is a significant prerequisite for membership. The EU's expansion strategy seeks to encourage regional cooperation, foster friendly relations among neighboring countries, and

promote peace in the area. The EU has offered support and aid to assist these nations in addressing and resolving these conflicts.

1.5 Recent developments between Kosovo and Serbia

Recent developments between Kosovo and Serbia, such as talks held in Brussels, have aimed to normalize relations between the two countries. However, disagreements persist on various issues, including the nature of the association between them. Progress has been slow, and tensions in Serb-majority areas of Kosovo continue to pose challenges.

2. Should enlargement to Ukraine and Moldova take precedence over the Western Balkans?

2.1 Political dimension and practical implications

The EESC's resolution on Ukraine and Moldova acknowledges the granting of EU candidate status and expresses readiness to strengthen cooperation and exchanges with civil society in these countries. The President of the Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen, has shown unequivocal support for Ukraine's EU membership, extending the vision of accession to the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Georgia. However, experts argue for a redesign of the enlargement process that offers early benefits of the single market while reserving full membership for later stages. The EU is internally unprepared to manage another major eastward enlargement, despite the geostrategic pull resulting from the war in Ukraine. The EESC emphasizes the importance of EU engagement in the Western Balkans, considering it a strategic investment for peace, stability, and economic and social development (Buras, 2022).

2.2 Urgency for EU engagement in the Western Balkans

The EESC reiterates its support for further EU enlargement, particularly in the Western Balkans. It urges the Council and EU Member States to fulfill their commitments by adopting negotiating frameworks for Albania and North Macedonia and granting visa liberalization for Kosovo. The EESC suggests revisiting the possibility of introducing qualified majority voting in the EU accession process to overcome difficulties in reaching unanimity among Member States. Granting EU

candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina is also emphasized as a key priority, requiring the country to fulfill the necessary criteria for its European integration (Stanicek & Caprile, 2023).

2.3 Challenges and limitations of enlargement

While enlargement to Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans is of long-term strategic interest to the EU, it faces various challenges and limitations. The enlargement process is both highly technical and political, with extensive requirements and alignment with EU standards. It poses difficulties for countries with limited governance capacity, such as Moldova and Ukraine. Additionally, the process is affected by political considerations, with individual member states holding veto power, hindering progress. The EU's enlargement beyond the Western Balkans seems unrealistic in the current geopolitical conditions.

2.4 Proposals for reforming the accession process

Michael Roth, Chairman of the Bundestag foreign affairs committee, proposes reforms to the EU accession process. These include allowing representatives of candidate states making progress in democratic governance and the rule of law to participate in European Council and sectoral Council meetings. Closer cooperation with the EU on security, energy, and infrastructure, as well as increased financial assistance, are recommended. Enhancing the role of pro-European civil society and assigning sponsorship of candidate states to EU member states are also suggested (Buras, 2022). The decision-making process for opening and closing chapters in the negotiation process should be based on qualified majority voting.

2.5 Need for a credible EU accession perspective in the Western Balkans

The prolonged wait for EU integration in the Western Balkans has resulted in growing authoritarian tendencies and diminishing trust in the EU. The blocking of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has damaged the population's faith in the EU, as reflected in opinion polls. The deadlock poses risks to political stability, necessitating a more credible EU accession perspective. Obstacles, such as obstructive actions by member states and nationalist politicians seeking concessions, need to be overcome. The acceptance of Russian narratives by Serbia and attempts to undermine the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina require strong condemnation and response.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the EU is not currently prepared for further enlargement due to decision-making structures, funding issues, and rule-of-law and governance problems. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine presents an opportunity for the EU to reform and become a more strategic actor in its neighborhood. The EU's relationship with the Western Balkans is characterized by broken promises, inertia, and stalemate. Without reforming the enlargement methodology, Ukraine may face a similar fate. While Ukraine and Moldova have achieved EU candidate status, the membership process for other countries, especially in the more troubled Western Balkan states, is unlikely to be swift.

3. Also, is it feasible and beneficial to the EU?

3.1 Advantages of Expedited Enlargement

An expedited enlargement, referring to the rapid integration of Ukraine and Moldova into the European Union (EU), carries several advantages and disadvantages. Advocates argue that such an approach can bring regional stability by fostering democratic governance and human rights. Additionally, it can unlock economic opportunities through increased trade and investment, given the substantial populations and resources of Ukraine and Moldova. Geopolitically, an expedited enlargement can counterbalance the influence of global powers like Russia, reinforcing the EU's presence and values in Eastern Europe. Moreover, it can strengthen a sense of solidarity among EU member states, strengthening the Union's voice and cooperation on the global stage (Sangiovanni, 2003).

3.2 Challenges of Expedited Enlargement

However, an expedited enlargement poses challenges. The EU's institutions may struggle to effectively manage the integration process and absorb new members, straining decision-making mechanisms and governance (Devrim, 2009). Economic disparities between Ukraine, Moldova, and more developed EU states could emerge, requiring significant financial resources and potentially causing social tensions. Addressing corruption and governance issues in both candidate countries is crucial, as their integration without resolving these issues could introduce instability within the EU. Public skepticism and resistance from member states concerned about the impact on their economies and cultural identity may also arise.

3.3 Feasibility of Expedited Enlargement

The feasibility of an expedited enlargement depends on several factors. Some of them are the readiness of Ukraine and Moldova to meet EU membership criteria, the capacity of EU institutions, and the political will of existing member states. Successful integration requires substantial efforts from both sides to address outstanding issues and implement necessary reforms.

3.4 Potential benefits for the EU

An expedited enlargement of the EU holds the potential to bring significant benefits to the Union both politically and economically. One key advantage is the strengthening of the EU's political influence in Eastern Europe. By integrating Ukraine and Moldova, the EU would extend its reach and solidify its presence in this strategically important region, enhancing its ability to shape regional policies and foster stability. Economically, an expedited enlargement would expand the size of the EU's single market (Bledowski, 2022), which is already one of the largest in the world. Ukraine and Moldova would bring in substantial population and some valuable resources to the EU, and this would create new opportunities for trade, investment, and economic growth. This expanded market would not only benefit the member states but also contribute to the overall prosperity of the EU.

3.5 Challenges and Preparation for Enlargement

However, it is important to approach an expedited enlargement with careful consideration and preparation. Potential challenges must be addressed to ensure a seamless integration process. These challenges include issues such as institutional capacity, decision-making mechanisms, and the absorption of new members (De Witte, 2002). Effective management of the complexities that might emerge during the integration process requires adequate planning and coordination among existing member states and EU institutions. Moreover, it is highly important to assess the readiness of Ukraine and Moldova to meet the requirements and standards of EU membership. This requires addressing issues such as corruption, governance, and the rule of law, which can pose significant hurdles to successful integration. By focusing on these aspects and providing support and guidance to the candidate countries, the EU can help them strengthen their institutions and ensure a solid foundation for their participation in the Union.

3.6 Conclusion:

Overall, an expedited enlargement has the potential to deliver important benefits to the EU. It can enhance the Union's political influence, expand the single market, and foster economic

development. Nonetheless, a well-prepared approach is needed to mitigate potential challenges and ensure a harmonious integration process that ultimately strengthens the EU as a cohesive entity.

4. Is Georgia ready to be an EU candidate state? - What needs to be done to realize this?

The progression towards EU candidacy is a gradual journey, demanding sustained endeavors and continual reforms. The EU closely monitors the progress of aspiring candidate states, providing assistance and guidance throughout the integration process. While Georgia has expressed its aspirations to join the EU, several substantive areas require attention and advancement for the country to meet the criteria for candidate status. These are some key aspects that require focus and progress:

4.1 Consolidation of Democratic Institutions and Rule of Law

The consolidation of democratic institutions and the upholding of the rule of law remain of great importance. Georgia should direct its efforts towards strengthening the transparency, accountability, and efficacy of its governance structures. To address political polarization, Georgia should prioritize efforts to promote dialogue, compromise, and inclusive decision-making. Enhancing the independence of the judiciary assumes particular significance in this regard.

4.2 Promotion and Safeguarding of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

The promotion and safeguarding of human rights and fundamental freedoms are vital prerequisites for EU candidacy. Georgia must endeavor to make further improvements in these domains, addressing any existing concerns and implementing requisite reforms. Special attention should be given to ensuring freedom of expression and the independence of the media. Georgia has tried to implement many new and innovative methods to meet EU criteria, so they have also improvements in different fields rather before now. But of course, there are quite important procedures in the agenda of Georgia in order to resolve domestic problematic affairs, which is very characteristic almost for all the countries who have desire of accession.

4.3 Assessment of Conditions set by EC for advancing towards the accession to the EU

Since the conditions were issued several months ago, all three states have reacted quickly and with diverse methods that their individual administrations and parliaments have adopted in an effort to quickly satisfy the demands. To summarize the current situation (this report is published in 2023 on May), table 1 uses color coding: green indicates that there has already been significant progress and that the criterion is almost fully implemented. where there is employment, it is yellow progress,

and orange for major problems that still need to be resolved. All three states have a number of heads in the green, yellow, and orange categories, indicating both accomplishments and areas that still need improvement. Ukraine and Moldova only have one incidence of an orange assessment, therefore the expectation is for further progress toward meeting the requirements. Their political institutions' operations have been implicitly judged to be of high enough quality to avoid the need to define further restrictions on this account. The rule of law is the top issue in both situations, progress is being made there, but it needs to be strengthened. Concerning political polarization, judicial reform, de-oligarchization, and media, where progress is most deficient, Georgia receives four orange ratings. Political polarization, which has proven problematic for Georgia in recent years, is a direct result of this. Georgia performs well across the board, primarily when it comes to enacting new laws or altering old ones. But when great political determination is needed, there hasn't been much development. Deoligarchization is one of the most important political challenges, and not addressing it prevents adequate action on other political and rule of law issues. (Table 1). (Emerson, Akhvlediani, & Cenus, THE EU ACCESSION PROSPECTS OF UKRAINE, MOLDOVA AND GEORGIA, 2023)

Table 1. Assessment of conditions set by the EC for advancing towards accession to the EU

| | Ukraine | Moldova | Georgia |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Political polarisation | | | 1 Measures, but insufficient |
| State institutions | | | 2 Major progress, but more needed |
| Judicial reform (a) | 1 Progress, further changes needed | 1 Work in progress | 3 Measures, but insufficient |
| Judicial reform (b) | 2 Work in progress | 2 Work in progress; certain deviations | |
| Anti-corruption | 3 Work in progress | 3 Work in progress | 4 Measures, but more is needed |
| Money laundering | 4 Work in progress | | |
| De-oligarchisation | 5 Work in progress | 4 Work in progress | 5 Superficial measures, greatly insufficient |
| Organised crime | | 5 Work in progress | 6 Solid basis for strong progress |
| Media environment | 6 Major progress | | 7 Measures taken but greatly insufficient |
| Human rights (a) | 7 Major progress | 9 No major problems | 8 Measures but insufficient |
| Human rights, ECHR (b) | | | 11 New legislation addresses priority |

| | | | |
|------------------------------|--|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gender equality | | | 9 Useful progress |
| Civil society | | 8 Work in progress | 10 Positive participation, with shortcomings |
| Public defender | | | 12 Major progress with setting new rules, but election delayed. |
| Public administration | | 6 Renewed attention | |
| Public procurement | | 7 Useful steps | |

 - Condition is mostly implemented
  - Progress is going on
  - Actions taken, but serious issues remain to be addressed

4.4 Economic Reforms and Market Compatibility

The implementation of robust economic reforms and the establishment of market compatibility are also imperative for successful integration. Georgia should prioritize the implementation of comprehensive economic reforms, such as streamlining administrative procedures, reducing bureaucracy, and enhancing transparency and accountability in public procurement processes. Achieving sustainable economic growth, enhancing competitiveness, and attracting investments are critical objectives in this context. Georgia should prioritize harmonizing its legal framework with EU directives and regulations, particularly in areas such as trade, consumer protection, environment and intellectual property. Adhering to EU standards will facilitate trade and investment flows between Georgia and EU member states.

4.4 Generating Public Support and Cultivating Awareness

Lastly, generating public support and cultivating awareness are very important for the pursuit of EU integration. Georgian public polls show that currently Public support for the EU integration is 80 percent. However, in order to maintain this optimism, citizens, civil society organizations, and relevant stakeholders should further be engaged to foster an understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with EU membership. Through active engagement of the public and cultivating support for the European integration agenda, Georgia can strengthen its dedication to the process of integration.

4.6 Conclusion:

Becoming an EU candidate state is a gradual journey that demands Georgia's sustained efforts and continual reforms. By consolidating democratic institutions, upholding the rule of law, promoting human rights, implementing economic reforms, fostering regional cooperation, aligning legislation with EU standards, and generating public support, Georgia can enhance its prospects of becoming an EU candidate state.

5. What were the main achievements of the Eastern Partnership, and does the EaP have a future if Ukraine, Moldova and possibly Georgia accede to the EU?

5.1 Introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a much-needed and potentially successful initiative of the EU. The Eastern Partnership aims to reinforce the **political association** and **economic integration** of six Eastern European and South Caucasus partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Within this framework, all partners have committed to demonstrate and deliver tangible benefits to the daily lives of citizens across the region.

5.2 Main achievements of the EaP

The EaP is intended to provide a forum for discussions regarding trade, economic strategy, travel agreements, and other issues between the EU and its Eastern European neighbours, the following achievements can be pointed out:

- The association agreements (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The EU signed Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, establishing closer political association, economic integration, and cooperation.
- Visa-free travel agreements with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (Associated TRIO).
- Mobility Partnerships: The EaP established Mobility Partnerships to enhance people-to-people contacts, promote youth exchanges, facilitate visa procedures, and support the mobility of students, researchers, and professionals.

- Sectoral Cooperation and Reforms: The Eastern Partnership facilitated sectoral cooperation and reforms in various areas, such as energy security, transport, environment, digital economy, public administration, and rule of law. These efforts aimed to enhance governance, transparency, and regulatory frameworks.
- Eastern Partnership Summit Declarations: The Eastern Partnership summits brought together EU leaders and the Eastern Partnership countries' heads of state or government. The summit declarations outlined shared objectives, highlighted achievements, and identified areas for further cooperation.
- Support for Civil Society: The EaP provided support for civil society organizations and initiatives, fostering their participation in policy dialogue, capacity building, and the promotion of democratic values and human rights.
- European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) Funding: The EU allocated significant financial assistance to the Eastern Partnership countries through the ENI, supporting a wide range of projects aimed at economic development, infrastructure improvement, education, healthcare, and other areas.
- People-to-People Contacts and Cultural Exchanges: The Eastern Partnership fostered people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges through various programs, scholarships, and initiatives, promoting mutual understanding, intercultural dialogue, and cooperation.

All the above-mentioned achievements are significant but the Association Agreements (AA) and Visa Liberalization can be regarded as the main attainments.

5.3 Prospects for the accession of the associated trio and The EaP's probable future

The European Parliament adopted on 23 June 2022 a resolution on the candidate status of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and perspective to Georgia. The European Council has decided EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. As for, Georgia, the European Council is ready to grant candidate status to Georgia once the priorities specified in the Commission's opinion on Georgia's membership application have been addressed. The Members insisted that there was no 'fast-track' for EU membership and that accession remained a merit-based and structured process, which required EU membership criteria to be fulfilled and was dependent on the effective implementation of reforms.

The EaP was originally designed as a framework for cooperation between the EU and the six Eastern European partner countries, including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, with the aim of

promoting political association, economic integration, and sectoral cooperation. If Ukraine, Moldova, and possibly Georgia were to accede to the European Union (EU), it would indeed impact the future of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). If these countries were to join the EU, their relationship with the EU would shift from the EaP framework to that of full EU membership. However, it is important to note that the EaP is not solely focused on EU accession. It also serves as a platform for promoting reforms, fostering regional cooperation, and supporting the development and stability of the Eastern Partnership countries. Even if some countries were to accede to the EU, the EaP could still continue to exist and play a role in supporting the remaining, non-associated partner countries.

5.4 Conclusion

In case of accession of Associated Trio to EU, the EaP could potentially evolve to accommodate the new dynamics and challenges of the region. It could serve as a platform for further cooperation between the EU and the remaining Eastern Partnership countries, as well as provide support and assistance to these countries in their European integration processes. Ultimately, the future of the EaP would depend on the specific developments regarding EU accession and the interests and priorities of the EU and the remaining Eastern Partnership countries. Flexibility and adaptability would likely be key factors in shaping the future direction of the Eastern Partnership in a changing regional landscape.

6. How does EU enlargement correlate with other, adjacent regional initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road, and Russia's Eurasian Union?

6.1 Introduction

The correlation between EU enlargement and other regional initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road and Russia's Eurasian Union, raises questions about economic relations between small and large countries. The size difference between nations often leads to debates on whether equality can be achieved in these relationships. Small countries must strike a balance between economic gains and security challenges in the international arena. The experience shows that Relationships with Russia (even if we take purely economic ones) led and has the potential to lead to the catastrophic outcomes to Georgia. On the other hand, Georgia strives towards the European Union. Another such attempt rests on Chinese Belt and Road initiative. Georgia, as a representative of the Black Sea Region and the South Caucasus, can be involved in two **other regional initiatives**: China's Belt and Road initiative and Russia's Eurasian Union.

6.2 China's Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Concerns

Critics perceive China's Belt and Road initiative as a potential trap, leading to increased corporate debts. However, China is keen on expanding its international economic relations and extends its hand to Georgia under this initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative consists of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." Within the "Silk Road Economic Belt," Georgia (along with Azerbaijan) is situated within the Central Asia and West Asia economic corridor. European support for Georgia's and Azerbaijan's involvement in the historic Great Silk Road, realized in 1993 through the Silk Road Transport Corridor, established a functional framework. However, it is important to note that the original projects aimed to create a transport and energy corridor linking to Central Asia, excluding China. Georgia's involvement in the "Silk Road Economic Belt" is facilitated by the operational Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, connecting Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, and bridging the East and West through the Caucasus. Consequently, Georgia's participation aligns with China's Belt and Road initiative. However, this initiative conflicts with Russian interests as it has the potential to reshape the economic development of the region, with China at its center, thereby reducing Russia's influence in the post-Soviet states. Russia has not supported the development of the Silk Road Transport Corridor project and, in response, initiated the creation of the Eurasian Union in 2016.

6.3 Russia's Eurasian Union: Economic and Political Objectives

The Eurasian Union, an expansion of the original Russian-Kazakhstan cooperation in 2015, encompasses both economic and political objectives. Along with the economic objectives it has political aims too, mainly to confront the American hegemony, as Russia aligns with a Eurasian ideology. It is important to note that Russia's ambitions extend beyond post-Soviet states and include countries such as India and China within the Eurasian Union. In 2015, Russian and Chinese leaders declared cooperation plans between the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative. This was followed by a 2016 statement emphasizing a strong partnership between the two initiatives. However, there are functional and priority differences between the initiatives. China prioritizes innovation development, while the Russian economy is based on consumer-oriented principles. Putin's political motives are apparent in his attempt to utilize economic mechanisms to achieve his goals.

6.4 Georgia as a Strategic Connector and Transit Country

Georgia plays a crucial role as a reliable transit country, connecting Azerbaijan with Turkey and extending further into Europe. The presence of transit capacities such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Jeyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines, along with the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, exemplifies

Georgia's significance in regional geopolitics and geo-economy. In May 2017, Georgia and China signed a Free Trade Agreement aimed to boost bilateral trade and transit. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan are members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which has provided substantial loans for infrastructure projects, including the construction of the TANAP gas pipeline in Azerbaijan and the Batumi bypass road project in Georgia. Georgia's membership in the WTO, combined with its agreements with the EU and China, positions it as a potential hub for expanding trade between the EU and China.

6.5 Conclusion

While Chinese Belt and Road initiative does not clash with EU enlargement project, due to its economic nature, Eurasian Economic Union is a completely different story. The latter is created and has the ambition at one glance to be the “European Union” of the region, however in economic terms it is more of a rival to China’s Belt and Road, if EU enlargement does not directly clash with, for example, Georgia’s being a participant of China’s Belt and Rad, Eurasian Union is absolutely not compatible with the EU enlargement agenda.

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