



Research Article

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Western Balkans, Some Reflections on the Geopolitical Dynamics of the Great Powers

Mirela Metushaj

PhD Candidate,
Aleksander Moisiu University,
Durrës, Albania

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to indicate the influence of the role of the Great Powers in the Western Balkans, in this region of contrasts, of many partial, which did not have an easy cohabitation between them, for various reasons, as shown in history from numerous wars. Being in a very interesting part of the western Balkans even Albania, my country had its sad history over decades. Western Balkans, despite being geographically distant from many of the great powers, has always attracted their attention, becoming a battling and disputable terrain by the great international actors, especially for putting political ideologies that would govern this part of the peninsula. Why does the Western Balkans rise so much interest in the international arena?

Keywords: Great Powers, Western Balkans, Albania, Geopolitic, influence

1. Introduction

The place in the regional, continental and global space, distance from the conditioning political, trading, economic, religious, etc. centers, as well as the morphological forms and distribution within the national space, make up the elements comprising the geostrategic position and, all in all determine even the geopolitics of Albania. Balkans is one of the three main peninsulas stretching into the Mediterranean and the place where the classic Sea meets the European continent. Peninsula is considered to be classic because it lies near four seas (the Adriatic Sea, Ionian sea, Marmara sea and Aegean Sea) and it is the only that connects Europe to another continent, Asia. It creates a unique relation to Asia exactly with another peninsula in this continent, the Small Asia Peninsula, or previously known as the Anadol Peninsula. The whole Balkans used to be „synonymous to the old Turkish and Bisantine empires, with ungoverned mountain ranges which stopped development and with a lower standard of living, which date back decades and centuries compared to the lands of Habsburger and Prussian empires in the heart of Europe“. The violent breakup of Yugoslavia has largely influenced the creation of a new geopolitical reality, which led to the breakup of ideological blocks in the region, accompanied by the continuous decrease of possible conflicts of the Great powers (because of their interests in the region), a period when Europe was involved rapidly in a process of internal and external integration. But, besides this collaborative phenomenon in the Balkans, another negative phenomenon dominated for almost one decade, where the breakup of Yugoslavia was associated with interethnic bloody conflicts that led two 4 wars, including the first intervention of NATO, consuming not only material and monetary valuables, but also many tiring diplomatic initiatives, both regional and European. At the end of the Cold War and violent breakup of Yugoslavia, Balkans appears with a new geopolitical reality, where apart from the main classic countries, which were in the region after WWII, new countries such as

Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnie-Hercegovine, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo were created, which have their own distinguishing characteristics.

Wellknown scholars have argued that the Balkans or Southeastern Europe have been determined and divided within themselves in different forms. Each sub-region corresponds to a geopolitical project, formed internally or externally. So, EU in relation to its interests has configured certain region, as the case of "Western Balkans", which expresses more the creation and evolution of a political concept than a geographic concept. During the meeting of the Council of Europe in Zagreb, in November 2000, a new term was introduced, which alludes another geopolitical project, that of Western Balkans

2. Methodology

I used a qualitative approach in this analysis, based on the documents, as a mentioned above, from international and national authors who, through their researches and citations show historical facts that give Albania a special post in the Western Balkans geopolitics. Authors and other sources.

3. Historical Background

Regions have their special dynamics which is half autonomous, but not independent from the system of the great powers and internal politics. Typically, regional threats are a reflection of a global situation which favors or discourages them. Balkans region – despite the wrong perception as a region that generates conflicts and genuine instability – is a reflection of global competition of great powers. Western Balkans – before the era of national country – has always been a border of division for great empires such as Rome, Bisante and Ottoman Empire. Countries of the Balkans have lived in stability and relative peace under the regime of empires, while conflicts have been more severe in the times of hegemonic power exchange. Relative autonomy of the Balkans has been constantly penetrated by the Great Powers and at times of severe conflicts countries of the Balkans have been used like proxy in the conflicts of great powers, and sometimes as opportunist countries in an effort to maximize their profit through exploitation os systemic conditions. The interest of the Great Powers in the Balkans is mainly limited in interests of safety of the Great Powers; this interest is not permanent, but changeable in relation to international conditions. Misha Glenny (1999) notes that interests of the Great Powers in the Balkans during WWII were strategic "Objectives of the Nazis in the Balkans from 1941 and afterwards were merely 'protective'. Hitler needed to protect furnishment with fuel from Romania to guarantee for his southern part for the operation 'Barbarossa' for invasion of the USSR" (Glenny, M. (1999). *The Balkans - Nationalism, Ėar and the Great Poĕers: 1804- 2012*. Canada: Anansi.f.478)". Interests of the ally forces in the Balkans during WWII were mainly limited in beating Germany without a clear project on what would happen in the Balkans afterwards. Although the Balkans had been the object of the discussions in conferences during WWII, there was no plan for their development. The most important moment for the fates of the Balkans is the so-called the agreement of percentage agreed between Churchill and Stalin before the end of the war. Stalin and Churchill met in Moscow at the end of October in 1948 and decided through a preliminary agreement to divide the zones of influence in the Balkans. The reason of the agreement was avoidance of a conflict between the ally forces in the vacuum created in the Balkans with the retreat of the German troops. ((Churchill, 1953, 198). This agreement urged historians to evaluate it as a 'betrayal' of Churchill to Southeastern Europe nations. Churchill in his memories explains that this agreement was temporary to beat Germany. "The informal and temporary agreement that I signed with Stalin during my visit in October in Moscow, as for me, could not have the aim to lead or affect the future of these regions after Germany would have lost". Albania is not nominally mentioned in the agreement of Moscow and this is emphasized even in the afterward communications of the British government. In the correspondence between Churchill and his Secretary of Eden country, it is emphasized that in the agreement of Moscow there was no discussion about Albania, but logically we can think that the attitude would be the same as for Yugoslavia. The Agreement of Percentage and cedation of USA and the Great Britain toward USSR in the Conference of Yalta for Poland, has given rise to a widely spread thesis that the fates

of Southeastern Europe in general after WWII have been determined by the agreements of the Great Powers. On contrary, agreements on the Balkans and Southeastern Europe in general are a reflection of the sharing of objective power in terrain. President Roosevelt has been recorded to say to the ambassador of Poland in the USA that USA and UK could not declare war to USSR because of Poland. "Do you think that they (Russians) will stop just to satisfy us and you? Do you expect us and UK to declare war to Joseph Stalin if they cross your former border? Even if we wanted, Russia could lead an army two times our combined forces and we could do nothing". Division of Europe into two parts is one of historic contingencies determined by spontaneous developments of the power in terrain. Great Britain and USA tried to hold as much as they could, while USSR tried to gain as much as their power allowed them to do so. As Rajak notes, there is no evidence that suggest that Stalin owned a planned programme for Soviet influence in the Balkans. "Its origin resides on sharing 'the war trophy' among winner superpowers with opposing ideologies. Moscow used 'popular' governments or 'popular fronts' as a means to dictate political influence". The foreign politics of Stalin towards Balkans at the last phase of WWII and in the following years is dynamic and an integral part of his global politics. Geoffrey Roberts shows four phases in which the foreign politics of Stalin developed: first phase is the politics of liberation and division of influence, during which the interests of Stalin were limited to beating Germany and defining the zones of influence among the Great Powers; after 1943, the three-party phase evolved, which was about the central idea of forming and governing a new order of safety by three ally forces, USSR, USA and the Great Britain; with the arrival of Soviet troops in German borders and their extension to most countries of Central and Southeastern Europe, there was a more ideological perception by Stalin, who linked the safety of USSR and peace in Europe to the popular democracy, but this on the conditions of undisputed with the ally forces; the final phase that leads to the consolidation of cold war in the aftermath of the war is related to the impossibility to find a common language with western forces for sharing the war trophy.

4. Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Configuration

It is natural that in a region like the Balkans, like in every region, area or place, it has its own references of orientation or geographical division. Regions, areas or places are distinguished also by the development rate, cultural features or religion. Even countries located in the Western Balkans have a considerable richness of such values, unique for Europe and elsewhere. However, identification of this wellknown region seems to be not much as a need to identify peculiarities of such values. Mostly, the demand to 'frame' this region arose as a need to manage this relatively underdeveloped region, to bring an adaptation to the levels of European development. Therefore, even the term "Western Balkans" expresses more the creation and evolution of a political concept than a geographical concept. The well-known geopolitician Carlo Jean, among others, notes that, in a study on geopolitics the first step is determining the space under observation; the second step is examining the usual historic trajectory and geopolitical representatives that have a strong influence on the perception of various groups, in defining their interests in political and pre-political interests. The third step is analyzing the current situation in terms of objectives and power

I would add even the prediction of future scenarios, etc. In the beginning by paying attention to the draft project of "debalkanization", in the study of Carlo Jean the term "Balkans" refers to the space, which alludes a project that refers to a space included in the Treaty of Stability for Southeastern Europe. This space includes 4 of 5 republics of former-Yugoslavia (excluding Slovenia), plus Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. Several times this great project for the Europeanization of the Balkans refers to the initiative 5-1+3. Relations between countries entered a new metamorphosis, where the weight of ideological arrangements outstood the weight of values and, naturally, even the geopolitical interests. In this aspect, even the Balkans Peninsula underwent one of the most significant metamorphoses in its history. Beside Greece and Turkey – already traditional allies of the NATO, integrated and aspiring to integrate into EU, would be Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, which would "translate" faster and more effectively the hopes of their nations for integration in economy, politics, safety and organizations where Europe was once included as a whole. As a consequence, most of them became members in the NATO and EU

immediately in the second decade after the end of the Cold War. Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina failed to keep up with other members of the Federation, such as Croatia and Slovenia. Of course, the reasons for this are several and are related to the proportional duration of the breakup in relation to its center, Serbia. The latter, tempted by the traditional hegemonic role in the region and urge of interests of Russia, kept the whole process on hold for about two decades through the ethnic conflict that interfered with the development in the desired direction by the nations of that unit and the wider interest for peace, safety and prosperity in the region. Kosovo was the country directly affected by this conflict. It had, with the liberating war and support of the Euro-Atlantic community, to solve firstly the main issue of independence and, then, to politically consolidate and guarantee safety and further development.

As for Albania, even though declaring and engaging actively by the integrating processes in the country and in the foreign politics, for many reasons, it could not manage democratic transformations in the field of economy, stability and security. It delayed in these processes and just a few years before was admitted to the NATO, while it is still relatively falling behind with the process of integration into EU.

Hence, since 1990, in the Balkans we have almost "two Balkans". The successful Balkans in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration and the unintegrated or semi-integrated Balkans. The integrated Balkans is the eastern and southern part, while the unintegrated Balkans is the Western Balkans, exactly that part of the region where Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia are located. So, it is not the geographical position that gives the name to this region, but the need for an essential distinction of countries in this part of the Balkans, to give a politically correct name to a subregion that is not Yugoslavia or Albania anymore, but in fact nowhere else. These countries, historically being enemies and currently for ethnic causes, find themselves in a state of instability and inefficiency even within them. In many of them, the political life, in the best case is over-polarized, and frequently even paralysed. These political-social features have caused insufficiency of institutional capacities, creating a favorable climate for corruption, informal economy, criminality and illegal trafficking. All in all, all these developments have stopped the prosperity, leaving nations exposed to poverty and massive emigration – a very worrying development not only national, but even European. It seems that these conflictual identities and indicators of underdevelopments in the integration process made the institutional Europe call the area of Southeastern Europe "the Western Balkans", which included countries that were not members of EU (Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania – or Albania plus former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia up to the latest expansion of EU with Croatia. The identity of "Western Balkans" is still used in the national and collegial canceleries of Europe; more as a political concept than as a geographical nomination. Based on this identity measure, Croatia, for instance, does not consider itself part of this region anymore, because it is a member of NATO since 2009 and of EU since 2013. Therefore, this country, together with Slovenia feel to be out of this identity. Albania is a member of NATO since 2009 and is close to gain the status of candidate for membership in EU, Montenegro in 2017 became the newest member in NATO. Finally, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo are in different stages for the status of candidate for membership both in EU and NATO. Practically, even though there was a substantial progress in the democratisation and modernization in the Western Balkans since 1990, still "the region finds itself in the middle of the transition process. It suffers from insufficient capacities of management and democratic credentials of the political elite. Therefore, the concept of "Western Balkans" is related to this identity of the need that this region has in order to change the values and rhythms and harmonize them with those of Europe because currently it is the region or area with the most delays in the continent, with influences both national and regional or continental. Every other meaning to show the Western Balkans as a region "in itself", as separated from this European viewpoint, not only would cause misunderstandings, but also would lead to tendencies to create balkanic idols.

5. Reflections on Geopolitical Dynamics in WB

Western Balkans 'buzzes' a very interesting complex of conditioning dynamics in the geopolitics of this region: dynamics of geography, historic depth, cultural diversity, religion, regional and

extraregional, internal and external actors, and globalisation as a world phenomenon from which Western Balkans cannot escape. Finally, in the view of these dynamics there is the current geopolitical dynamics, which, although cannot change completely the previous and traditional dynamics, forms new features, forces and vectors. The geopolitical fate of Europe has been largely the overlap of the three vectors of force: European vector, Russian vector and Ottoman vector. The theatre where these vectors met was the Balkans – a space of all and none. Austro-Hungary tried to advance its authority in the south of Danube; Russia wanted to control the Turkish Canals and gain access in its southern coasts from the Mediterranean; the Great Britain followed by France concerned to exclude any other Great Power from the Mediterranean Peninsula. Surprisingly, the previous history of the region had left an unsettled issue for these strategic axioms: the military destiny of ancient Rome was defined exactly in the Balkans, with Caesarius and Pompe in the decisive battle in the Balkans. Albanian territories have been an object of such battles: on one hand is the interest and influence of European forces and, on the other hand, the interest and influence of eastern Forces. While the European interest and influence aimed to keep contact and influence to keep alive and empower the European identity of Albanians, the interest and influence of Eastern Forces was different. On the other hand, we must ask this from current actors in the Balkans: Italy, Germany, Russia, China, England, USA, Turkey, Greece, NATO, EU. These actors have their similarities and differences. Italian dynamics, for instance, are cultural and historic, religious and political alliances, but the dynamics of security and economic-trading are naturally in the axis of the Italian interests. On a contrary direction to this Italian dynamics is the Russian dynamics. Russian interest in the Western Balkans is related to the need for access in fresh waters; with the creation and influence in the area through Slavic-Russian cohesion and orthodox with populations of most of the families in the region; with the expansion of the safety spaces by Alliance and NATO which Russia perceives as an enemy alliance; with the need to extend the economic trade in the region, etc.

Furthermore, it is evaluated that the Balkans is a meeting point of Islamic radicalization and Russian influence. This “alliance” is evaluated mainly on the political instability, ethnic tensions “sleeping” and economic poverty. As interest identities, but also linked to the Italian axis, there are the dynamics of the United Kingdom and USA. Both are sea forces and cannot have a role or global or regional interests if they are denied the access in the seas and oceans. The Adriatic Sea that controls the Western Balkans is a nevralgic sea for the Mediterranean because it joins it at the end of central Europe, whose countries make up a key of management for the whole European continent. Therefore, both United Kingdom and USA have dynamics of their interests in this direction. Meanwhile, both forces as bearers of western system of values are interested in safety and prosperity of this region to complete the democratic map of Europe as a whole. What makes even more interesting the English-American interest in the Western Balkans is keeping under control development in this region, holding Russia as distant as possible and unrooting and disconnecting routes of international terrorist networks that exploit the Balkans. Meanwhile, it is important to note that massive Russian purchases in Balkanic countries are aiming at those states that are in the NATO and European Union. Balkans is the big field of geopolitical disputes between the West, NATO and EU on one hand and Russia on the other hand, where the western party makes effort for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkans, while Russia makes effort to disconnect the Balkans from the Euro-Atlantic integration. As Julian Popov of the Foundation of European Climate writes “States are not always invaded with warplanes or weapons. Hybrid war is a serious thing. Bulgarian state must review the right of residence for foreign citizens and ownership of goods by them”. In a dimension of another nature appears the case of Germany and China. The part of the Balkans under the big part towards east and southeast is a big interest, especially economic interest for Germany. In the conditions of global economy and balances created in large strategic depths, Germany is interested to expand even bigger export trades in strategic depths towards Turkey, Central Asia and China. This route passes via Balkans, hence, lately Germany shows special interest to “channel” the Western Balkans towards the values of European integration. In an opposite but not opposing direction, but as a complementary is the Chinese dynamics to exploit the Balkans and specially the Western Balkans as a trampoline to catch the trades of Central and Eastern Europe. Somehow different from the above mentioned dynamics, the Turkish dynamics

requires the Western Balkans not only for the political, economic and geographical perspectives, but also for the sake of its historical, religious, cultural, security and human links to the region. There is no doubt that in the last decade Turkey has increased its presence in the Western Balkans through (i) strategic economic initiatives, (ii) intermediary and diplomatic initiatives, and (iii) creation of stronger cultural relations. Turkey has tried to be positioned as a main regional actor. Therefore, the Western Balkans is one of the regions where the principle “No Problem with Neighbors” has generated considerable effects and increased credentials for membership of Turkey in the European Union. However, there are various obstacles to the strategies of Turkey. Simply, the notion “neo-otomanism” negatively influences on the Turkish relationships with Balkan public. Turkey cannot have the same position as Washington or Brussels. According to Turbedar, the main obstacles of Turkey to have a more successful role in the Western Balkans are the insufficient collaboration of Turkey with the West and the prejudices within the region.

Table: A summary of the factors and vectors of geopolitical force in the Western Balkans*

State / Nation	Ethnic divisions in the Balkans	Key international orientation in:									
		History	Policy	Economy	Religious belief	Culture	In alliances		Power		
							NATO	BE	Population		World GDP per capita
								Residents (in millions)	Structure		
Albanian..	1+5	Turkey	SHBA, Kosovo	Italy, Greece	Mixed	Albanian	Yes	Yes	3,029,278	Almost unique	125
Serbs	1+3	Russia	Russia	Germany, Russia, Italy	Orthodox	Slavic	No	Yes	7,176,794	Almost unique	116
Macedonians	Split into two parts	Russia	Pro European	Germany, Italy, Serbia	Mixed	Slavic + Albanian	Yes	Yes	2,096,015	Mixed	112
Montenegro	1+0	Russia	Pro European	Serbia, Croatia	Orthodox	Slavic	Yes	Yes	647,073	Mixed	100
Bosnia	Split into three parts	Mixed	Pro European	Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, Germany	Mixed	Turkish + slavic	Yes	Yes	3,867,055	Very mixed	134
Croatia	1+1	Russia, Austria	Germany, Italy	Italy, Slovenia, Germany	Catholic	Slavic + italian	Yes	Yes	4,464,844	Almost unique	81
Kosovo	1+1	Turkey	SHBA, Albania	Italy, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia	Muslim	Albanian	Yes	Yes	1,870,981	Almost unique, with a Serb minority	144

*CIA Fact Book, 2015

* World Development Indicators database, World Bank, 14 April 2015

In the climate of a great competition among USA-NATO-EU and Russia, the Albanian issue must be settled in the national and international agenda, since it is condicio sine qua non for the stability and peace in the region. The dilemma on the future of Albanians must pass through the solution of this historic knot; with negotiations to review the Treaty of London and the Protocol of Florence or through the sword, like Alexander the Great solved the ancient knot, so through “blood and steel”, to cite again Bismarck on German issue. Collaboration could be the basis for a peaceful and humanitarian future. The system of security through collaboration requires the engagement of democratic states for close collaboration if needed for intervention in the region. Of course, the classic notion that democracies do not go to war cannot interfere with the engagement of democratic states to develop safety models not only within a country, but also in the region and elsewhere. NATO represents in itself the acting model as a safety model through collaboration. Contemporary problems in the field of security dictate the necessity for expansion of the concept of security through collaboration. The world, USA and Europe have entered a new era in the field of security. Globalization is more and more not a theory but a reality, which must be faced. Today, more than ever there is a need for flexibility to reflect the changes dictated by the new environment of security.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

As it can be seen even from the summary, the actors in the Balkans are more than in every other region; therefore, it is necessary to synchronise them and for this reason even the German initiative to undertake this role is vital. In 1991, the French politologue Jacques Rupnik said that

“Someone must Europeanize the Balkans in order to avoid the balkanization of the Europe”.

The region remains exploding and a confusing reality, with a probability to threaten the stability in Europe, which even without it is under threat by the Russian adventurism in Ukraine and Siria. Doubts on the perspective of expansion risk even more the security. Those doubts only reflect the failure of the visionary thought of the continental leaders. Frequently, the internal political requirements have urged many European leaders to emphasize the difficulties and failure of expansion. In these conditions, the European vision has began to lose terrain by reviving old nostalgies as we can see in the case of Turkey and Serbia. But, as Dominique Moisi notes, “In the time of a severe economic crisis, European ideals, despite everything, remain the only antidote to the national flu. For the Balkans, as for the rest of Europe, EU is the only alternative for a possibly worse future, but not as bad as the past. Balkans has still a fragile balance in the conditions of a mixed population over the centuries and with fragmented cultural scenes, which from their part, at certain moments, have brought political instability with and expansion and wider threat than the region. In this region it is pride to state a palce or nation taking disadvantage of another one. So, the continuous changes of political borders because of this statement have been considered with the other term „Balkanization”, which now is equal to the lack of civility in politics, literally, breakup or fragmentation of a large political unit into many smaller units, usually being enemies with one another. If we begin with this geography-history convergence, in the region of the Western Balkans, beside the local actors, regional and continental actors are overcrossed. In the Balkans they were obliged to pass and expand, in the balkans they clashed, won or lost to leave eventually their inheritance and furthermore, their interests. This is one of the causes that globalize the region of the Balkans even without launching the modern globalization. In the Western Balkans several international and Euro-Atlantic actors have been engaged, especially after 1990, trying to complement each other from the positions of their responsibilities. Here, for instance, European Union, United Nations, NATO OSCE, etc engaged. The Balkans in general and Western Balkans in particular needed their presence to stabilize the institutions and to create a peaceful and prosperity climate. This international presence has created a very favorable environment for an accelerated integration of these countries. Development of regional coloboration is to the best interest for all countries in the region and it is considered as a key factor for political stability, security and economic prosperity in WB. Many of the challenges, with which countries of WB face, are not present only for our countries, but also have an interborder dimension, which involves even our neighbors. Political leadership in WB could compensate considerably the lack of dimensions and forces of national realities only with huamn political-diplomatic capacities. The ability of a political and diplomatic leadership is related to the realist meaning of the situation and perspective of the national interests in the view of international developments. The leader guarantees vision, inspiration, organisational skills, direction, personal motivation necessary for the others to act in a concentrated way and logically for the sake of collaborative policies. The professional understands the levels of strategy and their relationships and develops the strategy by translating the general political instructions into integrated strategies not only within a country, but also further in the region and the world. It is known that with an experience of 22 years, SEDM has successfully united the countries of the region, in several activities expressed in the form of common projects and involvement in the war against terrorism, demilitarism, control of weapons, security of borders, exchange of military technology, common trainings, operations on prevention of natural disasters and activities related to the dislocation and accomplishment of peacekeeping missions out of our region. Also, 15-year activity of Adriatic Charter -A5“and the positive results evaluated by NATO and our allies, especially USA, make a story of success. In the view of international relationships from the creation to the end of 20 century, Albania as a fundamental institution of national security played an irreplaceable role since it kept the attributes and continuation of governing. However, the fact that Albania, compared to other small countries in the region and elsewhere, is generally

delayed in catching the political rhythms and economic rhythms of the whole life of the country, shows somehow insufficiency of the capacities of representing institutions. Time goes by in the direction that the potentials that a country has or creates multiply by addressing not only the multiplication of force, but also the collaboration of these forces (economic, political, social, cultural, military) with other actors, not only in bilateral level, but also in multilateral level and alliances. In this direction, Albania must advance in a 'perspective plan the added value of geostrategic position of Albania, as well as the need and its ambition for a new sea dimension of the country.'

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