

Turkish Case in Exchange Mobility: Incoming Students

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Abstract

Exchange Programs provide a rich platform to make it possible for the university students to explore and experience a cultural setting as well as a new learning environment. Turkey has been involved with mobility programs since 2002. Depending upon the disciplines signing bilateral agreements with partners, some of the departments are very lucky in terms of the number of the students incoming and outgoing. Regarding the collected data, the participants' Turkish experience is evaluated. The research question for this study was assessing whether exchange mobility programs change people's perspectives despite personal judgements or not. Not only qualitative but also quantitative methodology is followed to analyze the outcomes of the data. The survey data is discussed through various factors affecting the reflections and experiences of the participants.

Keywords: Istanbul University, Erasmus, Mevlana, Mobility, Exchange, Turkey

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Introduction

University education is important for self-development. Universities established in big cities usually welcome many students from smaller towns and regions. Having such a mobility, students are encouraged to learn new lifestyles, develop new expectations, experience new settings, new cultures and new perspectives. These include not only the educational aims but also taking part in enjoyable and social events enriching them culturally and personally. It brings a repositioning of the self into the society.

This study concentrates on the international mobility which takes place through exchange programs in higher education. According to Hannam, Sheller & Urry (2006):

‘Mobility’ has become an evocation keyword for the twenty-first century and a powerful discourse that creates its own effects and contexts. The concept of mobilities encompasses both the large scale movements of people, objects, capital and information across the world, as well as the more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space and the travel of material things within everyday life. (p. 1)

However, as the title suggests, this paper only focuses on one type: mobility in higher education.

In the present literature, there are various studies conducted on mobility and exchange programs with discrete target audiences. For instance, Weichbrodt (2014) has a study on German students and exchange programs on the high school level rather than the university level while Daly and Barker (2005) focused on Australian and New Zealand students and their participation in international exchange programs. There are also studies focusing on different contexts such as: the gender gap in one of the mobility programs (ERASMUS) (Böttcher, Araújo, Nagler, Mendes,

Helbing & Herrmann, 2016), the student motivation about why and where to go within an act of mobility (Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap & Axelsson, 2015), exchange experiences for the students (Hagen, Munkhondya., & Myhre, 2009) or intercultural competence (Aba, 2016.).

Exchange Programs

Mobility might exist in every aspect of life. And this mobility also takes place within higher education as well, through mobility programs called “exchange programs”. Istanbul University has the Erasmus Program and the Mevlana Program as the main exchange programs.

These exchange programs focus on students and their incoming and outgoing processes. Since it only focuses on students within the higher education facilities, these programs have some limitations such as age, talent or department of study, etc. There might be also variations in disciplines and academic fields in which countries place importance. In other words, different countries may want to invest in different fields of study based on their own national interests, needs and plans for future generations. Students wishing to be involved in different disciplines, join education steps on specific fields of study, learn theoretical knowledge and practice it with an internship in a completely different education system or business life, have a career in an academic field for which their countries don't have any bachelor's or associate degree programs. Such students might want to consider looking for a new place to go to for their own goals and plans. Thus, exchange programs play a key role in making up for this possible negation. Yet, unlike middle and high schools, universities and the programs within this higher education facility focus on a more “individual” and unique education that attracts only the people who are truly interested in particular fields.

While exchange programs have such key roles and important impacts, it's also a challenge to have an equivalence between the degree programs in different countries or cities during the

application process for an exchange mobility. Certain legal procedures and processes are to be transacted for an exchange mobility to take place. This is why departments of universities have bilateral agreements only with relevant departments and also limitations for incoming and outgoing students. Even though it's only for a limited amount of time, significance of the gains and advantages which an exchange mobility can bring along is inevitable, since exchange mobility programs help to increase intercultural awareness in students who participate in these programs. Intercultural awareness covers how each culture differs from the others but tolerates the otherness (Genç İltter, 2016, p. 570). However, intercultural awareness would not be the only gain. According Alba and Sidhu (2015), if executed thoughtfully, immersing students in unfamiliar cultural environments and different academic systems can make them aware of their own taken-for-granted practices and assumptions by bringing them into contact with people and issues that broaden their perspectives (p. 721). Key lessons in leadership can be obtained from visiting other places and people and learning from their experiences (Aarvold et al., 2011, p. 87). In addition, as the study by Ruddock and Turner (2007) identifies, cultural sensitivity can develop as a consequence of participating in an international experience (p. 368). Lastly, cultural competency can be obtained as well (e.g. Deane, Hamman & Liping, 2015).

Impacts of Exchange

Exchange starts with deciding to go to a different country and this decision-making process involves many different parameters such as economic, sociological, psychological perspectives and the reflections on the target country. If all these are somewhat positive, then the individual may decide to risk his/her time in the target country. Otherwise, they never volunteer for something they don't really know or feel negative about. We may assume that the incoming students had already glimpses of positive feelings which is why they volunteer for an exchange.

Coming from different cultural backgrounds, having the same cultural activity would cause different impacts on different people, since every national or local culture is unique to itself and one of the major elements which shapes the perspectives and perceptions of individuals. Yet, to downscale these impacts to a generalization, it can be said that there are two different types of impacts. The first one is an ‘immediate impact’, while the second one is the ‘delayed impact’. Immediate impact can be explained by the initial reactions and impressions of the individual to the newly encountered cultural elements. And the delayed impact is felt when a certain amount of time passes after the first encounter with a foreign culture. For instance, a student might find it hard to adapt herself/himself to a particular cultural element while she is still in the host country, and when she goes back to her home country, she might think of that particular cultural element and how it actually enriched her personally and culturally.

This study analyses the experiences, personal opinions, impressions, insights of 39 foreign exchange students and the meaning attributed to the time spent in Turkey by them. Focusing on the immediate impact explained above, a questionnaire of 12 questions has been used as a tool to assess the research question of this study, which is as follows:

- *Does exchange mobility change people’s perspectives despite personal judgements, correct or incorrect representations through the media?*

While the aim of this study is to look for an answer to this question within a limited target audience, it also aims to make a contribution to the existing literature by providing an insight into the case of Turkey. The data is collected from 39 foreign exchange students studying at Istanbul University Language Centre in 2016-2017 academic year. They are currently learning Turkish and Turkish culture before they start degree programs at the university. The results reveal that

exchange mobility help people gain different points of views and change some of the students' perspectives despite what they heard beforehand, while also enabling them to explore a new culture and learn from it.

Aims and Methodology

The Aim of the Research

This study aims to explore what incoming exchange students from various countries think about Turkish culture and Turkish lifestyle in Istanbul, Turkey. Considering the fact that all of the students come from overly different cultural backgrounds, their individual insights are of importance in the context of how Turkish culture, education system and lifestyle are perceived through the eyes of them. It also aims to analyze the connection between the questions asking about what they heard and experienced positively and negatively.

The outcomes and results of this study are expected to help to build a solid framework about the immediate impact in relation with the question of whether their perspectives change after their arrival and through their own experiences. It also aims to make contributions in the context of what can be done to enhance the image of Turkey which is an important factor in shaping foreign students' decisions to choose Turkey as a host country in the future.

The Methodology of the Research

Focus group interaction through a questionnaire was planned for the data collection of the study. There were 39 incoming exchange students from various countries studying at Istanbul University Language Centre who replied to the questionnaire. Both males and females at different ages answered the questions. Demographics of the participants such as country of origin, sex and age are not seen as variables and not classified. And since there was such a diversity of the backgrounds of the participants, the only variable chosen was to be an incoming and foreign

exchange student. Throughout this study, multiple-choice questions were not used assuming that each choice could have a limitation on the side of the participants. That's why an open-ended answer is valued more. The classification of the replies was shaped and determined based on their replies. Due to the limitations, out of 12 questions, only 4 of them were covered and discussed in this paper:

1. Please list five NEGATIVE things you have heard generally about Turkey.
2. Please list five NEGATIVE things you experienced first-hand in Turkey.
3. Please list five POSITIVE things you heard generally about Turkey.
4. Please list five POSITIVE things you experienced first-hand in Turkey.

The questions asking about what the participants heard before their arrival in Turkey, whether they are asking about the negative or the positive ones, aim to explore the representation of Turkey and image of Turkish culture in foreign countries. In addition, they can provide insights of how their judgements on Turkey might have been shaped and affected before their arrival in Turkey, which helps to uncover the change in their perspectives later on.

Questions about personal experiences aim to explore what students go through in a foreign environment, whether what they heard before their arrival is true or not, and how students' experiences differ from one another.

Yet not every student listed five answers to questions as they were asked to. Some of the students chose to answer the questionnaire with less than five insights per each question, which is why the number of given answers to the questions varied from one question to another.

Findings and Discussion

The given answers have been classified based on their content and the percentage distribution of them is also presented in Table 1. These classifications are as follows:

1. **Politics:** This classification included the answers about political instability, “bad” politics, major political events, Turkey’s international position, governmental system and some subjective opinions in relation to it, restriction of rights/rights violation in Turkey.
2. **Geographical / Physical:** The answers about certain geographical elements such as the weather, the country’s location on the world map as well as some subtopics of human geography such as population, traffic congestion and urban living were listed under this classification.
3. **Otherisation:** This classification involved answers of the students which were about racism, sexism, gender inequality, students’ own worries about being perceived as “the other” due to their different nationalities, religions and races, and treatments towards foreigners.
4. **Economic:** The answers about Turkey having a “good/average” economy, prices or rents being cheap or expensive, Turkey being a “developed” country, business life and finding or not being able to find a job in Turkey were included in this classification.
5. **Religion:** This classification included answers about Muslim population, Turkey “being an Islamic State”, secularism and freedom of religion in Turkey, religious extremism and “religious” approaches of Turkish people.
6. **Security:** The answers provided by the students that were about terrorism, bomb attacks, Turkey being close to the war in Syria, violent acts and harassment, crimes and current security and safety situation in Turkey are listed under the security classification.
7. **Culture:** Since there can be multiple elements of a culture, various answers about different cultural elements such as history, music and hospitality are all included in this

classification. In addition, characteristics which exchange students attributed to Turkish culture and Turkish people are also analyzed under this classification.

8. **Language:** The communicational problems due to the language barriers, Turkish people “not being able to speak English”, Turkish language “being very hard to learn” are mainly among the answers that were given by the students.
9. **Social Life and Services:** This classification covered the answers that were about “good/bad” service, social relationships, legal procedures or bureaucratic process, characteristics which exchange students attributed to lifestyles, living conditions and public and social services in Turkey. Answers about Turkish cuisine are also included in this classification.
10. **Health:** The answers about health service, hygiene and cleanness are covered in this classification.
11. **Education:** The students’ answers which were about Turkish education system, their own experiences through the education they had in Turkey and own impressions of education facilities and teachers/professors are involved in this classification.
12. **Tourism & Aesthetics:** This classification included students’ impressions about natural beauties, touristic and aesthetic places and attractions, landscapes and resort areas.
13. **Integration:** This classification included the answers about foreign students feeling integrated into the Turkish society and culture.
14. **Other:** The answers which were quite different from one another and not eligible to be classified under the classifications above are covered in this section. Recommendations on Turkey, subjective and personal thoughts such as Turkey being “cool/very good” country,

Turkish people “being the closest people for them”, and “good and bad times” in Turkey are included in this classification.

The findings of the 4 main questions are presented in the table below:

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Geographical & Physical</i>	<i>Otherisation</i>	<i>Economic</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Security</i>	<i>Culture</i>
<i>1</i>	16%	5%	13%	5%	14%	22%	13%
<i>2</i>	2%	12%	12%	2%	2%	16%	21%
<i>3</i>	2%	2%	0%	7%	6%	2%	31%
<i>4</i>	1%	2%	0%	3%	3%	3%	40%

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Social Life & Services</i>	<i>Health</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Tourism & Aesthetics</i>	<i>Integration</i>	<i>Other</i>
<i>1</i>	8%	1%	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%
<i>2</i>	15%	12%	3%	2%	0%	0%	1%
<i>3</i>	0%	22%	0%	7%	21%	0%	0%
<i>4</i>	2%	21%	2%	8%	12%	3%	0%

Table 1: Findings of the 4 questions covered in this paper

The total number of the answers which were provided by the students was 115 for the first question. 4 out of these students stated that they had not heard anything generally about Turkey beforehand.

As presented above in Table 1, students have heard of various things about Turkey before their arrival. However, it can be seen that there is a slight dominance on politics, security, religion, otherisation and culture. Since the political news, as well as the violence acts, and bomb attacks have impacts on an international level, they are addressed by the international newspapers and news channels, in other words, by the media (including social media). In a globalized world, the accessibility of such information about a host country and what recently happened there is

available to everyone who has an internet connection. Thus, it's no surprise that exchange students have heard about political and security situation in Turkey before their arrival. Yet the given answers about religion and religious acts in Turkey do not draw the same objective picture. As stated in the constitution of The Republic of Turkey:

The Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state governed by rule of law, within the notions of public peace, national solidarity and justice, respecting human rights, loyal to the nationalism of Atatürk, and based on the fundamental tenets set forth in the preamble. (*Const. of the Republic of Turkey*. Art. 2, Part I. n.d.).

The examples of the given answers by the students about religion and secularism in Turkey are as follows:

- *“Turkey is an Islamic state.”*
- *“There is radical Islam in Turkey.”*
- *“Turkey is a Muslim country and it'll be difficult for me because I'm from an another religion.”*

As it can be seen in the examples, students who gave answers about religion thought of Turkey as an Islamic country. This can be interpreted as that the representation of Turkey, especially on the international media affects people's perceptions in an incorrect way. While Turkey is a secular country and does not have any official religion in its constitution, students heard the very opposite. There was one particular answer such as:

- *“Turkey is a Muslim country which lost its Islamic culture and it's overly influenced by the west.”*

This answer is also important in the context of revealing that not everyone heard the same things about Turkey, even though the answer is quite subjective. The findings reveal that there are

also answers about otherisation and racism against people in Turkey. Upon analysis of some of the answers, there is a link between the answers about religion and otherisation because people heard about a certain negative treatment or discrimination against non-Muslim people in Turkey, as it can be seen in the example below:

- *“Only Muslim students will have priorities in every aspect in Turkey.”*

However, the classification of otherisation didn't only include the answers about being discriminated because of religion. Examples of students answering differently are as follows:

- *“I heard that ‘Turks hate Greek people’ and I was warned to not trust Turkish people.”*
- *“There is a distrust of strangers in Turkey.*
- *“There is sexism and bad behaviors towards females.”*

The classification of culture included various aspects. However, in relation to the interpretations stated above, it's important to point out that students heard about Turkish people being, “arrogant”, “rude”, “jealous”, “unfriendly”, “unhelpful”, “annoying” “homophobic” and “aggressive”. In the following discussions of other questions, it can be seen that the students have found out that this also was not correct for everyone. For other classifications, what students heard about is generally objective and proven to be true (with some exceptions which will be addressed later in the following discussions of other questions) with the findings of other questions. There were 113 answers given by the students to the second question. There were 4 students who stated that they did not experience anything bad in Turkey.

It can clearly be seen in Table 1 that findings of the second question varied compared to the first question. Firstly, there is a significant decrease in the percentage of religion (from 14% to 2%). While most of the students heard about “Turkey being an Islamic state”, “radical Islam in Turkey” or “the obligation of wearing a hijab/scarf”, the students did not state that they

experienced any extremism or radical religious acts or obligations in Turkey. However, there are two exemplary answers which show the discomfort of two foreign students in interaction with Turkish people in this context.

- *“I have been asked questions about my religion such as whether I’m a Muslim or a Christian”.*
- *“The common question of Turks, ‘Are you a Muslim?’ disgusts me a lot.”*

There is also a decrease in the classification of security. However, it’s important to point out that the given answers by the students about security mainly included crimes or harassment they experienced.

- *“They have a lot of theft problems.”*
- *“There is harassment from men in the tramway.”*
- *“There were people staring at me and stalking me.”*

However, there were answers about terrorism and such violent acts, as well:

- *“There have been terrorist attacks in big cities, especially in public places.”*
- *“I have experienced terrorist attacks.”*
- *“I have heard some gun shootings.”*

Considering these data above, it can be interpreted that the security issues included more about certain crimes and harassment, with a few exceptions on terrorism. The decrease in the percentage of security may mean that the “dangerous” image of Turkey is not completely true. However, some of the students had still some unfortunate experiences.

The classification of culture mainly included answers about negative traits attributed to Turkish people by the students as seen in the exemplary sentences below:

- *“Some people are rude.”*
- *“Turkish roommates are unfriendly.”*
- *“People are impatient.”*

Social life and services, along with language, are the classifications which had increases in their percentages as well. Firstly, the replies about language cover the language barriers and communication problems the students experienced in Turkey. For instance:

- *“Hard to communicate with people, only few can speak English.”*
- *“No one in public offices can speak English.”*
- *“People only speak Turkish.”*

The data given above confirms what the students heard about language and relevant issues regarding the language before their arrival. The findings of the first question show that students heard about language barriers and Turkish people not being able to speak English. And the findings of the second question indicate that there are indeed language barriers in Turkey.

Lastly, social life and services included answers mainly focused on the social services. There were answers confirming what some of the students heard about the bureaucratic and social service system in Turkey, such as:

- *“The people working in the governmental departments are really slow.”*
- *“It was really hard to take care of registration, getting a student ID card etc.”*
- *“I had some trouble with social service assistance because of Turkish language.”*

Some students also stated that they experienced a sort of discrimination. It can be seen in the example sentences below:

- *“There has been a bad treatment to foreigners.”*
- *“I have been asked as ‘Why are you black?’, it gave me an impression of racism.”*

- *“Guys were not respectful.”*

There was one particular answer about religious discrimination:

- *“Despite being a country which constitutes the majority of Muslims, I had to face some sort of a discrimination for being a Muslim.”*

The data presented above generally may mean that there might be certain examples of different classifications confirming what the students heard before their arrival. However, at the same time, students did not experience extremist religious acts as the most of them expected to, or some students did not witness any terrorism or violence acts as they heard before their arrival.

The total number of given answers are 122 for the 3rd question, 1 of which is about not hearing anything positive about Turkey beforehand.

As Table 1 shows, there have been many students hearing about tourism and aesthetics regarding Turkey before their arrival. The answers were mainly as the exemplary sentences below:

- *“There are many historical and touristic places to visit in Turkey.”*
- *“I heard that Turkey is a very beautiful country.”*
- *“Istanbul is an amazing city.”*

Since what students heard about Turkey in the context of tourism is positive, this might have been an important factor which supports their preferences for an exchange mobility to Turkey.

There is a clear increase in the classifications of education, culture, social life and services. The examples are as follows:

- *“Turkish cuisine is great.”*
- *“Transportation system is very good.”*
- *“People of different lifestyles live in Istanbul without any problems.”*

- *“Nobody interferes in what you do; everyone minds their own business.”*

These listed above are for the classification of social life and services, and they also support and show that even though people heard about otherisation and experienced discrimination in Turkey, there are people who heard the very opposite as well. Turkish cuisine is one of the important elements that has been appraised in the answers of the following questions, as well.

For the culture classification, the percentage is 31%, indicating an increase compared to the first and second question. This suggests that people heard more positive things about Turkey before their arrival than hearing negative things. Exemplary sentences are as follows:

- *“People smile, they are friendly and good hearted.”*
- *“Turkish people are very positive and they have hospitality.”*
- *“They are helpful and generous.”*

In addition, there are some answers describing Turkish culture as “interesting” and “multicultural”.

The answers about Turkish economy mostly covered some characteristics about it, such as “an improving economy” and “among top 20 economic power”. And answers about the education system in Turkey are mainly as follows:

- *“Education is advanced.”*
- *“There are good facilities for studying.”*
- *“There is a good education in Turkey.”*

Hearing such positive things about education in Turkey might have been another important factor for the students’ preferences for an exchange mobility to Turkey in the context of academic aims.

Lastly, there is a slight increase in the classification of religion in this chart as well. This is particularly significant because the provided answers about religion for this question are different from the ones above, as seen below:

- *“There is halal food in Turkey.”*
- *“It’s easy to find mosques to pray five times a day.”*
- *“There are Muslim people in Turkey.”*

This can be interpreted as that an environment which allows for a religion to be practiced, ability to find “halal” food and people of one particular religion makes the students who belong to same religious background happier and make them feel more comfortable even though they are in a foreign country. Thus, the existence of a certain religious environment may be perceived as either positive or negative depending on the individual background.

The number of given answers to the 4th question was 123, 1 of which was “none”. 4 students answered this question by saying that they feel like “home” in Turkey.

As Table 1 indicates, students’ experiences related to the culture in Turkey have covered nearly half of the given answers. The majority of the content of the answers are just like in the example sentences given below:

- *“There is a huge respect for senior citizens and old people are very nice.”*
- *“People are so kind and they can even invite you to their houses.”*
- *“People are so helpful and ready to communicate and direct me even as a foreigner who do not understand Turkish.”*

The number of given answers about positive traits attributed to Turkish people outnumbers the negative ones when the questions are compared. This can be interpreted as that some of the students who heard Turkish people being “rude”, “annoying”, “unhelpful”, and “unfriendly” found

out that Turkish people were actually “warm”, “friendly” and “helpful”. However, there are exceptions to this that are not presented in this paper due to very limited number of those examples.

In the context of social life and services, most students answered the question with focusing on the “good”, “well organized” and “advanced” transportation and healthcare system, “delicious” Turkish cuisine and “good” places and restaurants to go to. One student also stated that “street performers are amazing”, which also hints a positive perspective on a cultural element, that is music. For the economic classification, answers varied depending on the individual basis. The reason being is that while one student stated that it was cheap to live in Turkey, another student said that everything was very expensive.

This question revealed one important aspect of some of the students’ experiences. 4 students have given the answers below:

- *“I don’t feel like a stranger in here.”*
- *I can be just like Turkish people and live with them.”*
- *“Greeks are treated very well by Turks. I was not expecting that.”*
- *“There is a very ‘brotherly’ feeling in Turkey.”*

These four answers show that 4 students feel like they are integrated into the society and they feel happy and comfortable even in a foreign country. The student who did not expect Greek people to be treated “very well by Turks” also reveals that the judgement of Turkish people “hating Greek people” that was stated in the first question was incorrect. And the fact that this student was warned “not to trust Turkish people” and later on found out that “Greeks are treated very well” show that we can have certain judgements against other people which might not be true at all. Thus, exchange mobility has a key role to expand one’s horizons and it encourages people to be more open minded and overcome their prejudices.

The answers such as the followings can again support that the representations and images of Turkey being a “dangerous” country are not always true:

- *“I feel mostly safe in Turkey.”*
- *“It’s safe here, not as mentioned in news/media.”*
- *There is no ISIS in Turkey.*

Conclusion and Future Directions

We live in a globalized world where cultures and values started to have common, in other words, global characteristics. However, local and national cultures still affect individuals and shape their identities in a certain way, till they eventually get intercultural awareness. And one of the best ways to get consciously aware of oneself and “the other”, in other words, foreign individuals from other cultures and countries is having an exchange mobility. Exchange mobility has certain impacts which can be classified into two aspects which are the “immediate impact” and “delayed impact”. Within this study’s scope, the immediate impact is analyzed through a questionnaire to seek an answer to the research question of the study.

Findings reveal that the students heard about mostly incorrect or subjective representations of Turkish culture and lifestyle through the media or friends or relatives. And later on after personal experiences, they found out that most of what they heard was either incorrect, or subjective or did not present the whole picture for them. Some of the students stated that they had a better experience than what they expected, that they felt like ‘home’, in other words, integrated. This mainly answers the research question of the study.

However, there were some confirmations on negative things about which they heard before their arrival through their own personal experiences as well. Thus, it can be said that while some

of the students' perspectives changed thanks to unexpected situations and personal experiences, some other students' expectations were met, whether they were positive or negative. Having a look at Table 1, it can be seen that generally the high percentages of the classifications for the questions about hearing and experiencing negative things tend to drop in the 3rd and 4th question. Additionally, there is an increase in the percentages of certain classifications such as culture, tourism, and social life and services. Thus, in the context of immediate impact, this can mean that their experiences and changes of perspectives left a positive immediate impact on the students.

For future directions on relevant studies, a bigger target audience or target audiences from specific cities/countries/regions/continents, and a more detailed questionnaire uncovering more in-depth insights would enable researchers and scholars to provide a more extensive framework thanks to more data and thus, more detailed analyses.

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