



**Why migration diplomacy matters for
the 2023 Greek and Turkish elections**

—
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Summary

Migration diplomacy is the strategic use of migration flows to extract political and economic concessions. This policy brief examines the influence of migration diplomacy on national elections in Greece and Turkey in the light of the 2015–16 European migration crisis and the 2020 Greek-Turkish border crisis. While the former was linked to the Syrian civil war, the latter was sparked by President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statements regarding opening up the borders with Greece for asylum seekers hoping to enter Europe. This led to a humanitarian crisis that was exacerbated by the Greek authorities’ response, which included pushbacks and arrests. The brief argues that migration diplomacy is a crucial aspect of state behaviour not only as a foreign policy tool but also in domestic politics, and that this is applicable beyond the particular cases of Turkey and Greece. We recommend that, particularly during national elections, policymakers consider the role of migration diplomacy in framing “crises” as influential events on domestic political agendas that involve European Union relations, humanitarian assistance and burden-sharing. Ultimately, we argue for a more comprehensive understanding of migration diplomacy that considers its use as a domestic political tool. This would provide a basis for more effective responses to “refugee crises” and border management.



Introduction

On 27 February 2020, the Turkish government unilaterally declared that it would no longer prevent asylum seekers or migrants within its territory from entering Europe. This led thousands of people to gather in the town of Edirne, in the country's north-western corner, on the Turkish side of the Greek-Turkish border. As the Greek authorities sought to prevent any irregular crossings into European territory, a crisis quickly unfolded as thousands sought to use Turkey's Pazarkule border to cross into Greece via its Kastanies border point. The 2020 Greek-Turkish border crisis provided an opportunity for the two countries to engage in the most recent case of bilateral migration diplomacy. This had important repercussions for foreign and domestic policymaking and understanding the ways in which migrants and refugees can be commodified to extract resources or make other economic or diplomatic gains.

Following the fallout from the Syrian civil war and the 2015–16 “European migration crisis”, the European Union (EU) and Turkey increased their partnership on migration management in the context of the EU-Turkey Statement, signed in March 2016. The Statement, which sought to establish cooperation on migration management, particularly of asylum seekers, contains three crucial points: (a) Turkey would take any measures necessary to stop people travelling irregularly from Turkey to the Greek islands; (b) anyone who arrived in the Greek islands irregularly from Turkey could be returned there; and (c) for every Syrian returned from the islands, the EU member states would accept one Syrian refugee who was waiting

inside Turkey. In addition, Turkey was to be paid €6 billion (International Rescue Committee 2023). Both sides affirmed their commitment to the Statement and cooperated closely on its implementation.

While the EU-Turkey Statement was signed between the EU as a collective and Turkey, one particular member states, Greece, became a crucial actor in European border management, attempting to leverage its geopolitical position through migration diplomacy, particularly in the context of economic bailout negotiations (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2022). At the same time, after the statement was signed, Turkey felt emboldened to coerce the EU more openly in terms of Turkish migration diplomacy. Frequent demands for additional economic aid were combined with Erdoğan's urging of European support for his government's strategy towards Syria.

The breaking point for the EU-Turkey Statement occurred in the aftermath of Turkey's failed military operation in Idlib. This led Turkey to employ asylum seekers as a geopolitical pawn in its relations with Greece and Europe. On February 27, 2020, Turkey's announcement that it would no longer prevent asylum seekers from crossing the border into Greece, in violation of the 2016 Statement, led to thousands of people attempting to enter Greece by land and sea routes, which resulted in a stand-off between the two countries. The Greek government responded by deploying military forces to the border, suspending asylum applications and enacting measures to deter refugees from entering the country (Reuters 2020). To further inflame the issue, in March 2020 Erdoğan stated: “Once the gates were open,



I started receiving phone call after phone call telling me to ‘Close the gates’, and we said that it is too late for that now, now the gates are open and you [the European Union] will be shouldering your share of this burden” (Tosun 2020). The 2020 Greek-Turkish border crisis lasted almost a month, leading to numerous clashes at the border, arrests and dire human rights abuses. Thus, despite an underlying logic of cooperation, the EU-Turkey Statement facilitated the use of asylum seekers as bargaining chips, and reified the importance of national borders between Turkey and Greece in the minds of policymakers.

Although different in many respects, both countries share important similarities. First, Greece and Turkey have a long and entangled history of migration diplomacy stretching back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchange (Adamson and Tsourapas 2022). At the same time, the two countries have not hesitated to engage in issue-linkage strategies, in which their respective management of minority groups or cross-border mobility has been intertwined with a range of other issues from the demilitarisation of the Aegean islands to the Cyprus issue. Ultimately, the two countries’ use of asylum seekers in their foreign policymaking came to be mirrored in domestic affairs, which was particularly evident in the Greek-Turkish border crisis in 2020.

This policy brief analyses the impact of the 2020 Greek-Turkish border crisis on the domestic politics of migration diplomacy, focusing in particular on the ramifications for the 2023 national elections in both countries.

Scholarly and policy work on migration diplomacy has traditionally focused on interstate relations. That the domestic dimension of this phenomenon is yet to receive sufficient attention poses challenges for comprehensive policymaking. More broadly, while migration diplomacy is typically associated with international relations dynamics and foreign policy, the crisis highlights the long-term impact of refugee arrivals on domestic politics, especially during national elections when refugees are apt to be used as political tools. This brief examines the ways in which migration diplomacy is reflected in domestic politics, and patterns of migration diplomacy in domestic politics. It also identifies which aspects should be further analysed in order to develop more accurate and comprehensive policymaking that links migration management to geopolitics.

The Greek-Turkish Border Crisis and the Domestic Implications of Migration Diplomacy

Migration diplomacy is understood as the “strategic use of migration flows as a means to obtain other aims” as well as “the use of diplomatic methods to achieve goals related to migration” (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019, 116–17). As a framework for understanding politics in the Eastern Mediterranean, it provides a novel perspective on European, Turkish and Greek policymaking in terms of labour and forced migration (key analyses include İçduygu and Aksel 2014; Müftüler-Baç 2020; Norman 2021; Demiryontar 2021). While a long line of scholars has identified how the EU has attempted to pursue its interests around its periphery through



externalisation (Jaulin et al. 2020; Buehler, Fabbe, and Kyrkopoulou 2022), a focus on migration diplomacy allows us to understand the extent of the “refugee commodification” that has occurred as a result of diplomatic negotiations between countries of origin, transit and destination (Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021). Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies of migration diplomacy from both Global North (Micinski 2022; Hollifield and Foley 2022) and Global South perspectives (Thibaut and Thiollet 2021; Geddes and Maru 2020; Norman 2020), as scholars and policymakers seek to understand the interplay between migration and foreign policy (for a critical review, see Tolay 2023). The events of and statements following the Greek-Turkish border crisis demonstrate that migration diplomacy has also become a political tool in domestic politics.¹

Greek migration diplomacy in the context of the 2020 crisis sought to secure two key domestic goals. First, it aimed to demonstrate the new centre-right New Democracy (ND) government’s assertiveness in combating irregular migration, thereby fulfilling one of Prime Minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis’ key electoral pledges. The ND government had only recently been elected and the 2020 border crisis became the first test of its tougher stance on immigration. Immediately following reports of refugee movements at the Evros border, Mitsotakis declared an “asymmetric threat” to national security and publicly stated that Greece would not allow undocumented people to enter its territory (Smith and Oltermann

2020). The Greek government sought to securitise the issue from the very beginning, underplaying any human rights or international law component. According to the prime minister’s Twitter account:

Significant numbers of migrants and refugees have gathered in large groups at the Greek-Turkish land border and have attempted to enter the country illegally. I want to be clear: no illegal entries into Greece will be tolerated. We are increasing our border security (France24).

On 28 February, Mitsotakis called a meeting of senior officials in all the relevant ministries, which agreed on aggressive measures to tackle the issue. Greece deployed police, as well as military and special forces to the border, and sought the help of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), which responded by dispatching an additional 100 border guards from its RABIT team for the protection of the EU’s external borders (Frontex 2020). Asylum seekers were confronted with smoke grenades as they tried to cross the barbed-wire fences, and some reported abuses on the Greek side of the border, albeit by non-Greek forces (Human Rights Watch 2020). At the same time, the Greek state suspended all asylum applications for one month by revoking article 78.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The government declared that anyone crossing the border without authorisation would be immediately deported (Amnesty International 2020).

¹ This section builds on: Tsourapas, Gerasimos. *Forthcoming*. “Migration Diplomacy as a Three-Level Game in Greek-Turkish Relations”.



The securitisation of the event continued rhetorically as Stelios Petsas, then Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister and Government Spokesperson, stated that the incident was not related to immigration but constituted an “active, serious, unusual, and asymmetric threat” to Greek national security. Similar messages were conveyed across pro-government media outlets, as well as various social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. The government also sent SMSs to the international cell phone numbers of anyone located near the border stating that security levels across the Evros river were at a maximum, and that they would not be able to cross into Greek territory (AlArabiya 2020). At the same time, Greek media highlighted how the Greek military was using loudspeakers to communicate with asylum seekers through announcements in Arabic, Bengali, Persian and Urdu, warning that the border was closed.

Second, Greek migration diplomacy sought to undermine SYRIZA, which was now the main opposition political party, by contrasting ND’s adroit management of the 2020 border crisis with SYRIZA’s response to the 2015–16 Mediterranean refugee crisis. SYRIZA’s initial open-border policy had been heavily criticised both domestically and abroad and many political analysts believe that former prime minister Alexis Tsipras’ ambivalent approach to irregular migration contributed to SYRIZA’s lacklustre electoral results in 2019. Beyond tying its management of the 2020 border crisis with an overall narrative of securitisation, Greece’s migration diplomacy under Mitsotakis also sought to contrast ND’s management of the 2020 border crisis with

SYRIZA’s past record (on this, see Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2022). In fact, Mitsotakis appointed Michalis Chrisochoidis – a political figure known for his uncompromising position on law and order and the dismantling of the terrorist organisation, 17 November during his previous tenure in 2002 – as ND’s Minister for Citizen Protection. Chrisochoidis had visited Evros in December 2019, and declared the government’s intention to “make Evros impenetrable and safe” by use of an electronic surveillance system. According to a March 2020 national opinion poll, 92% of respondents considered themselves worried about Turkey and the Greek-Turkish dispute, while 76% of respondents perceived the government’s policies on Evros as “definitely” or “probably” correct (SKAI 2020).

In the context of the 2020 border crisis, Turkey’s migration diplomacy also sought to accomplish various domestic objectives. One aim was to exploit the presence of refugees. Hence, the EU-Turkey Statement sought to emphasise Turkey’s “holier-than-thou” approach to hosting refugees. In the early years of the presence of high numbers of Syrian refugees, this drummed up nationalistic sentiment, while in later years it helped divert attention from an ailing economy and other domestic political matters. An issue of the utmost importance in demonstrating the domestic link to migration diplomacy occurred early in 2020. Operation Spring Shield, a contentious cross-border military mission conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces in early 2020, had directly preceded the Greek-Turkish border crisis. This operation sparked controversy both domestically and internationally, and Erdoğan – and Turkey – faced criticism from



various quarters. International actors repeatedly urged Turkey to call for a ceasefire, to which Erdoğan responded with steadfast determination to transform Idlib into a safe haven for Syrian refugees (Wirtschaftler 2020). Erdoğan clarified that Turkey's operation in Syria was not an attempt to expand its borders or engage in adventurism (Euronews 2020). Despite acknowledging the severity of the situation, Erdoğan remained resolute, referring to the operation as "gruesome" (BBC Turkish 2020).

The operation persisted until it reached its nadir with the killing of 33 Turkish soldiers in Idlib, which shocked the Turkish public and increased critical voices, further highlighting the operation's failure in many eyes. A nationwide poll conducted in February 2020, the period of Erdoğan's lowest public approval rating, found that only around 30% of respondents considered the Idlib operation necessary (Duvar 2020). Similarly, politicians and other influential domestic actors saw the operation as a means for Erdoğan to consolidate his power at the expense of other domestic forces calling for withdrawal (Cupolo 2020).

Erdoğan expressed disappointment with the international community's lack of support for Turkey and criticised the EU for not intervening in Syria. He also cited the EU's failure to comply with its promises outlined in the EU-Turkey Statement and reiterated further unfulfilled EU promises. His threats were carried out immediately when Turkey opened its borders with Greece to asylum seekers hoping to travel to Europe within days of the deaths of the Turkish soldiers in Idlib. Some reports even suggest that buses were provided by the Turkish state to ferry

refugees to the Greek-Turkish border (Zaman 2020). Furthermore, on 28 February 2020, the official Twitter account of the Turkish government's Arabic-language broadcaster, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), shared maps of the routes that asylum seekers could take from Idlib to the EU, along with suggestions for the best routes to use when transiting through Turkey (Congar 2020). The uproar over asylum seekers at the border instantly changed domestic headlines from Turkish losses in Idlib to the Greek-Turkish border issue, transforming both the international and the domestic political agenda.

Erdoğan clearly acknowledged Turkey's position as both destination and transit country for refugees, and stressed that Turkey saw refugees as guests not enemies. He again stated that Turkey had not caused or exacerbated a refugee "crisis" and criticised EU Member States for closing their borders to asylum seekers, leaving Turkey to deal with the issue alone. Moreover, in April 2020 a press release from Turkey's Ministry of National Defence reissued a subtle threat by stating that the ministry wished to draw attention to "the fact that the refugee flow that may be triggered by a conflict environment in Idlib may not only affect our borders but may also spread to Europe" (Milli Savunma Bakanlığı 2020). These statements were followed-up with a re-emphasis of Turkey's geopolitical importance, its role as a strategic partner of many countries in the region, and the country's goal of protecting its borders and citizens.



Refugees and the 2023 Greek and Turkish National Elections

The instrumentalisation of forced migration in February and March 2020 by both the Greek and Turkish governments has had important, continuing repercussions for both countries, as is becoming evident in the run-up to the 2023 national elections. In Greece, the 2020 border crisis has contributed to a shifting of the political narrative in terms of the country's management of forced migration. Whereas the question of asylum seekers and refugees was firmly on the agenda during the 2018 elections, this appears no longer to be the case in 2023. Arguably, the continuing securitisation of the matter by the Greek government and key newspapers, as well as television outlets and social media has led to the question of asylum seekers and refugees being replaced by other key policy issues of the day – from the collapsing transport infrastructure to ND's management of inflationary pressures and the overall cost-of-living crisis.

At the same time, the tactic of zero-sum issue-linkage pursued by the Greek government in February and March 2020, in which a potential decision to admit asylum seekers into Greek territory was portrayed as a Turkish victory, also bore fruit in terms of the desensitisation of Greek public opinion vis-à-vis a softening of national borders. The continuing message about an «εργαλοιοποίηση» (instrumentalization) of asylum seekers on the Greek-Turkish border included overtones of refugees as “weapons” in an age-old conflict between Greece and Turkey, and was successful in shifting at least part of Greek public opinion against any

attempt to instigate a more liberal refugee policy.

Thus, the 2023 Greek national elections will not be decided by the topic of refugee management, despite the fact that the Greek government has been accused of illegal pushbacks along the Aegean, or that thousands of asylum seekers continue to reside within Greek territory and face pressing issues with regard to their integration and well-being, or even their survival. Greek migration diplomacy during the 2020 border crisis, therefore, produced particular domestic political results: it infused a distinct realpolitik argument across the Greek political and social body, which has arguably continued to hinder any fruitful discussion with regard to international law, refugee repatriation or human rights.

In Turkey, public opinion towards Syrians has been complex and variable since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Many Turkish citizens express sympathy and support for Syrian refugees fleeing war and persecution, and have welcomed them into their communities. This has been reflected in grassroots initiatives to provide aid and support to refugees, as well as in government policies aimed at easing their integration into Turkish society. However, overarching attitudes have been negative and there have been many instances of anti-Syrian sentiment, particularly in areas where there are large concentrations of Syrian refugees. Some Turkish citizens have expressed concern about the impact of refugees on the jobs market, house prices and public services, and have called for stricter immigration policies.



Furthermore, the issue of Syrian refugees has become highly politicised in Turkey, as different political parties adopt different stances, which reflect their electoral incentives. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been the main supporter of refugees, while the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has been more critical. For instance, while the AKP has framed the issue through religious solidarity and refers to Syrians as "our brothers and sisters", the CHP has always opposed intervening in Syria's domestic politics and claimed that should the party come to power, it will return Syrians to Syria. These debates have been exacerbated by the EU-Turkey Statement, as the AKP was the main signatory on behalf of the Turkish government, while the CHP framed it as a "negotiation with human lives" in which Turkey has become the "refugee depot".

This has contributed to an already polarised public debate in the upcoming elections, mainly around security and terrorism linked to the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey, and made refugees one of the main topics in the electoral debate. Interestingly, despite the fact that Syrians have been present in Turkey for more than a decade, a major shift occurred following the local elections in 2019, where control of Istanbul shifted from the AKP to the CHP. Although no studies directly link this loss to Syrian refugees, there is anecdotal evidence, and newspaper articles, such as interviews conducted with AKP constituents (Bişkin and Babat 2019), tend to treat this shift as the combined impact of economic hardship and the presence of Syrians. Building on these tendencies, since the summer of 2022, when the June 2023 elections first came to the

forefront of Turkish domestic politics, political parties began mentioning their plans to "send Syrians back". For instance, to demonstrate the particular domestic impact of migration diplomacy, an anti-immigrant and anti-refugee political party, the Victory Party (ZP), has been established in Turkey for the first time. ZP was founded by Ümit Özdağ, a political figure who has long been a prominent actor in far-right political parties and far-right ideology in Turkey. ZP has one motto: "During Victory Party rule, all refugees will leave". While the elections also heavily focus on the economic crisis in Turkey – increasing inflation and unemployment – and restoring democracy, this has led to a particular domestic political outcome. It has introduced and guaranteed a continuing debate on refugees in Turkish domestic politics for years to come, intertwined with discussions on the security of the nation and border management, and overshadowing debates on the refugee's rights, access to services and any other human rights violations that refugees face in Turkey.

While this policy brief focuses on Greece and Turkey, refugee instrumentalisation in national elections is not just an issue for these countries. For example, Morocco has been involved with various types of EU migration agreements for decades, but its relationship with Spain was further solidified in October 2018 when Spain's secretary of state for migration declared that Spain would be Morocco's "voice" in Europe (Teevan 2018). The EU approved the distribution of €140 million to Morocco to increase border controls, which the Moroccan minister for foreign affairs claimed was only a starting point for further negotiation on the issue (Norman 2020).



However, the relationship momentarily faltered in 2021 when Western Sahara Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali was permitted to travel to Spain for medical treatment. Moroccan border guards allowed approximately 12000 people, predominantly from sub-Saharan Africa, to enter the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in two days. Relations were restored after Spain approved a dispersal of €30 million to Morocco and after the Spanish prime minister declared that allowing Western Sahara to operate autonomously under Morocco's rule represented the "most serious, realistic and credible" solution to the decades-long dispute (Parra 2022). Western Sahara remains one of Morocco's key foreign policy concerns and one of the few issues that unites opposition parties within Morocco. Continuing to drum up support for Morocco's stance among both Western and African allies has therefore been a priority for the administration of Mohammed VI.

Tunisia represents another example of refugee instrumentalisation from North Africa. European interest in Tunisia increased in 2020 when an economic downturn put increased pressure on both Tunisians and migrants who had been residing in Tunisia to travel irregularly to Europe. Since President Kais Saied came to power in a coup d'état in mid-2021, he has looked for avenues to legitimise his increasingly authoritarian rule and distract from the country's economic woes (Jackson 2023). Saied has also attempted to scapegoat migrants, making racialized and xenophobic remarks, such as his claim that the presence of sub-Saharan migrants is part of a "criminal plan to change Tunisia's demography" (Boulifi 2023). Despite these inflammatory comments

against migrants and the anti-democratic measures taken by the Saied government against citizens and opposition parties, the EU, and Italy in particular, has sought to put pressure on the IMF to release a \$1.9 billion loan to Tunisia in order to prevent irregular migration from the country to Europe (Jackson 2023). Such funding endorses Saied's repressive rule to the detriment of political actors still working for democracy in Tunisia.

Domestic Politics as A Missing Factor in Migration Diplomacy Analyses

Recommendations for Researchers

This brief has emphasised the impact of migration diplomacy on domestic politics and how the power politics inherent in the use of migration diplomacy can be utilised as leverage by domestic political actors, particularly during election periods. It argues that it is crucial to consider the ways in which migration diplomacy is used as a political tool in domestic politics. To demonstrate this, we have identified three trends.

First, it is critical to consider migration diplomacy as not confined to the international policy arena, as its use by governing parties has the potential to alter domestic political contests. Turkey is just one case in point. As the analysis has shown, the presence of millions of Syrian nationals in Turkey for more than a decade and their commodification by the ruling AKP in dealings with the EU not only tied the AKP to the issue, but also shaped the political strategy of the country's main opposition. The outcome of years of political



manoeuvring around the issue by both incumbent and opposition parties will be apparent in the upcoming national election, with major consequences for both Turkish citizens and non-nationals, and the latter's ability to remain the country.

Second, migration diplomacy can also shape the national politics of the countries on the receiving end. Erdoğan's use of coercive migration tactics at the Greek-Turkish border in 2020 and the violent response by the Greek authorities led to a hardening of attitudes in Greece to the plight of asylum seekers, and was ultimately used as a political football by the incumbent ND to criticise the previous ruling party's handling of asylum seekers and migrant arrivals in 2015.

Third, it is critical to acknowledge that migration diplomacy has direct impacts on domestic politics because its outcomes can have direct and perverse effects on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in both the short and the long term. In Turkey, the use of migration diplomacy by the AKP was one factor that led to a hardening of opposition party stances towards the presence of Syrians in Turkey. When the CHP formed a coalition with other political parties, it was forced to adopt a more restrictive platform than its centre-left positioning might initially have indicated. If the CHP-led coalition is elected in 2023, the new government might follow through on promises to return Syrians to Syria, where many individuals would face persecution by the Assad government, which remains in power.

Recommendations for Policymakers

The Greek-Turkish border crisis is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach to resolve. Moreover, the issues it raises are not specific to Greece and Turkey as there have been many similar crises at the periphery of the EU, such as the Spanish-Moroccan border crisis of the summer of 2021 and the Polish-Belarusian border dispute in early 2022, both of which led to human rights abuses by border patrol forces and the deaths of migrants. By implementing the recommendations outlined below, migrant and refugee host countries and the international community can work together to address the humanitarian and security challenges posed by any crisis created through migration diplomacy, and promote a more sustainable and equitable system for responding to refugees.

- *Immediate bilateral dialogue:* Greece and Turkey should engage in constructive dialogue to resolve the crisis peacefully and in accordance with international law. While the EU is a key player in refugee reception at its borders, Turkey and Greece should develop additional bilateral dialogue on cooperation between the two national authorities to ensure the safety of refugees. This would not only help develop sound relations but also pave the way to sustainable border policies based on joint and coordinated actions.
- *Revision of the EU-Turkey Statement with an emphasis on responsibility-sharing across the European Union:* The Greek border also serves as an EU border. This requires other EU member



states to share the burden of hosting refugees by offering resettlement and relocation programmes, while assisting the Greek authorities with refugee arrivals and relocations. In particular, the principles of the Common European Asylum System should be reiterated. However, the emphasis on return should be diminished as one of the initial rationales for the EU-Turkey Statement was the return of refugees to Turkey, which led to the border crisis and gave Turkey disproportionate power over refugee reception in its dialogue with the EU. As one of the most important recommendations, this will

also reduce the powerplay between Greece and Turkey which they might otherwise use to bolster their domestic political image by using refugees as leverage or a domestic political tool.

- *Humanitarian assistance:* Aligned with responsibility-sharing, the international community should provide humanitarian assistance to Greece with the reception, relocation or integration of refugees. Further rights-based services will also need to be provided in connection with immediate medical care, food and shelter.



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