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European Union External Migration Policy: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article drops the historical evolution of the European Union's (EU) external migration policy from its early prescriptive foundations in the 1980s and 1990s to its consolidation as a securitized and externalized authority regime between 2015 and 2025. Drawing on official EU documents, Eurostat and Frontex numerical series, and a comprehensive form of peer-reviewed literature, the study rebuilds the sequence of institutional milestones the Schengen Agreement (1985), the Tampere and Amsterdam frameworks, the 2005 Global Approach to Migration, the 2011 Global Approach to Migration and Movement, the 2015 Valletta Summit and Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement, the 2020 New Pact on Migration and Asylum, and its 2024 acceptance that together define the trajectory of the EU as an external migration actor. Using a qualitative historical and documented method, the article places these developments within the broader theoretical debate between securitization (Buzan et al., 1998; Huysmans, 2006) and humanitarian-normative framings (Barnett & Weiss, 2011; Chandler, 2011) of EU external action. Quantitative indicators of asylum applications and irregular border crossings for 2015–2025 are offered to illustrate how policy instruments correlate with instabilities in migratory pressure. The findings suggest that the EU's external migration policy has advanced along a path-dependent trajectory in which humanitarian language and restraint-oriented externalization have become mutually strengthening rather than contrary features of governance. The article accomplishes that understanding this historical route is essential for rendering the EU's modern posture under the newly adopted Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Keywords: *European Union, External Migration Policy, Externalization, Securitization, Humanitarian Power, Common European Asylum System, New Pact on Migration and Asylum.*

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1. Introduction

One of the most sensitive and controversial areas of European integration has been migration governance. The European Union (EU) has grown from being a loosely knit community of states with open borders to a complex multi-layered political entity extending the EU's migration management well beyond its borders over the past 40 years. To appreciate the EU's current approach to migration, it is important to consider how the EU has gradually built its institutions since the Schengen Agreement was signed in 1985, and the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties of the 1990s, through which the EU has created tools such as readmission agreements, mobility partnerships, cooperation between border agencies, and conditionality in financial pledges, among others (Boswell, 2018; Geddes & Scholten, 2019).

The next ten years (2015-2025) is a critical period in this evolution. More than 1.3 million asylum seekers arrived within one year spurred the EU to deal with the structural shortcomings of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and with a shift towards externalisation, defined as the transfer of the migration control, processing and containment functions to third countries through diplomatic, financial and operational cooperation (Lavenex, 2012; Moreno-Lax, 2018). The aim of this article is to give a historical-analytical overview of the evolution of the EU's external migration policy, of the instruments that have been used to shape it and of the interaction between the quantitative trends of migration and the institutional responses to these trends in the past ten years.

The article is organized as follows: Part 2 is a historical overview of EU external migration governance before 2015. In Section 3 the 2015 crisis is explored as a structural turning point. In Section 4 the focus is on the main tools that have been created in the period from 2015-2025. Section 5 provides quantitative trends in terms of asylum applications and irregular border crossings. In Section 6, the theoretical discussion about securitization and humanitarian externalizations is presented. The impact of the more recent structural shocks – Brexit, COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine – on policy coherence is explored in Section 7. A discussion and conclusion are given in Section 8.

2. Historical Foundations of EU External Migration Policy (Pre-2015)

The beginnings of a clearly external dimension to a European Union migration policy lie in the Schengen Agreement of 1985 and the later Schengen Convention of 1990, which eliminated the checks of internal EU member countries but required external-level compensation at the Union's borders (Geddes & Scholten, 2019). By eliminating the internal barriers, the need for a functional external border management mechanism has been put into effect – any failure at any member state's external border became in effect a failure at the Schengen area's external border. As this interdependence logic has been a key structuring element of EU policy since then, successive treaty reforms have always included complementary measures of internal freedom of movement and external control (Boswell, 2018).

A special mention must be made of the 1999 European Council in Tampere, Finland, which represented a milestone in the development of Europe's norms in the field of Roma. In addition to the Common European Asylum System based on the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Tampere conclusions also contained a reference to 'partnership with countries of origin', 'political, human rights and development issues' and opportunities for 'cooperation with third countries for the better management of migratory flows' (Geddes, 2016). Indeed, although the operational tools for implementing it were not yet in place, with funding mechanisms, standing agencies and formalised third-country agreements, this language was a precursor to the externalisation vocabulary which would dominate the EU discourse 20 years later. Tampere's idealistic partnership language and the limited capacity of the EU's institutions at the time prevented the development of more concrete cooperation in the early 2000s, so for a considerable part of the decade, the cooperation was more promotional than concrete (Lavenex, 2012).

The Treaty of Maastricht (1993) gave asylum and immigration a place in the institutional agenda of the European Union as a common interest under what became the third pillar—namely, the European Union's justice and home affairs pillar—and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) communitarized asylum and immigration policy, gradually transferring this competence to EU

institutions, with 5 years set for a minimum standard (Boswell, 2018). The vision of a Common European Asylum System, based on the complete application of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and a partnership with countries of origin, is a first step that migration management would not be limited to the internal harmonisation process.

In the mid-2000s, a special external dimension started to emerge. In 2005, the European Commission has expressed the Global Approach to Migration (GAM) for the first time, with its initial focus on Africa and the Mediterranean, with the design of dialogue platforms, mobility partnership and cooperation frameworks with the countries of origin and transit (European Commission, 2005; oeil.europarl.europa.eu, 2007). The Council's 2007 conclusions continued and developed the Global Approach, including a formal joint maritime operation and a furthered political dialogue with partners in Africa and in the Euro-Mediterranean region. In 2011, the scope of this framework was expanded both geographically and thematically to the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), which introduced circular migration schemes and made migration policy more closely related to the development cooperation goals (European Commission, 2008; ec.europa.eu Eurostat, n.d.).

In the early 2010s, the backbone of the externalization of bilateral readmission agreements, the regional dialogue processes (Rabat and Khartoum Processes) and an emerging Africa-EU Partnership on Migration, Mobility and Employment was already in place (Zaun & Nantermoz, 2023). The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) further continued this development by transferring the co-decision powers over asylum and immigration law to the European Parliament and by inculcating the Common European Asylum System into EU's core legal framework, thus fully consolidating the process of communitarization started at Amsterdam (Rosenberger & Ruedin, 2025). The 2015 crisis did not create the concept of externalization, but it certainly brought it to a new level of intensity, formalization and financing, in a magnitude and speed unprecedented in the EU's history.

It is also important to note that throughout this period, the Dublin Regulation, which was first introduced as the Dublin Convention in 1990 and

recast in 2003 and 2013, has served as the internal mechanism to external containment. This principle of the Dublin system enticed the first country asylum-seekers were received, namely the Mediterranean and Balkan countries, to deter them from coming to their countries in the first place and not to facilitate their redistribution after the arrival, disproportionately burdening these states with the actual administrative and logistical work of examining an asylum claim (Börzel & Risse, 2018). This institutional weakness or internal design flaw is often referred to as one of the neglected causes for the EU's shift towards externalization, as external containment was the politically easiest way to solve internal difficulties of solidarity because these had proven difficult to implement through political agreement (Carrera et al., 2018).

3. The 2015 Crisis as a Structural Turning Point

2015 was a turning point in the evolution of the EU's migration policies in history. In 2015 the EU received around 1,322,135 asylum applications (Eurostat, 2023) and in 2016 some 1,248,325, both of which were the highest number ever recorded by Eurostat, as driven mainly by the war in Syria, as well as conflict and instability in Afghanistan, Iraq and parts of Africa, a decade ago (Consilium.europa.eu, n.d.). In 2015 alone Frontex recorded approximately 1.82 million irregular border crossings, which is 10 times more than in any year before or after (Frontex, 2024a).

These numbers revealed the structural problems of the Dublin Regulation's first country of entry principle, stretched frontline states like Greece and Italy and sparked an acute political split among member states regarding relocation and burden-sharing (Geddes, 2016). The EU institutionally reacted in two ways. Internally, it tried to implement with limited success emergency relocation schemes for asylum-seekers within the member states. Internationally, it pursued a policy of containment and cooperation, most obviously that of its involvement in the November 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration, which gathered EU and African heads of state and led to the establishment of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) with an initial commitment of €1.8 billion, which was later raised to some €5 billion through 250 programmes in 26 African countries (europarl.europa.eu, Legislative Train Schedule, n.d; europeandatajournalism.eu, 2023).

The most impactful single instrument from the period was, however, the EU–Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016, which took the following steps: Turkey agreed to accept back irregular migrants crossing to the Greek islands, in exchange for financial support (first of €3 billion, then the Facility for Refugees in Turkey was expanded to €6 billion); visa liberalisation talks; and a commitment to resettle one Syrian refugee in Turkey for each returned Syrian from Greece (Maiani & D'Auria, 2021). The impact of these statistics was instant and severe: the total of irregular crossings along the Eastern Mediterranean route dropped from around 885,000 in 2015 to about 182,000 in 2016 across the EU (although there are important costs to asylum-seekers' procedural rights and access to fair hearings that have been documented by scholars since this time; see Maiani & D'Auria, 2021; Moreno-Lax, 2018).

4. Key Policy Instruments, 2015–2025

4.1 The EU–Turkey Statement (2016)

The template for EU financial compensation and political incentives for migration containment which appeared in the EU–Turkey Statement and was subsequently followed in the EU's interactions with other transit countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Mauritania throughout the next ten years (De Haas & Dijkzeul, 2023; Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2024).

4.2 The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (2015–2021)

EUTF started operations in Valletta in November 2015 and ended up approving nearly €5 billion for 250 programmes in the Sahel/Lake Chad region (€2.2 billion), the Horn of Africa (€1.8 billion) and North Africa (€0.9 billion) (Consilium, n.d.-b). Independent assessments have praised the Fund for its ability to secure rapid and flexible financing, while also noting that it has allocated an "outstanding" proportion of resources to border management and repatriation infrastructure, rather than root cause of displacement (europeanatajournalism.eu, 2018; europeanatajournalism.eu, 2023).

4.3 There is also a Mobility Partnerships and Migration Partnership Framework (2016)

In 2016, the Migration Partnership Framework was launched, which establishes country-specific migration commitments through tailored migration

partnerships with priority countries such as Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and Ethiopia, including development cooperation, facilitating trade and legal migration, readmission, and border control. (europarl.europa.eu, n.d.).

4.4 The European Border and Coast Guard (2016, 2019) and Frontex Expansion

The 2016 regulation establishing Frontex as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (ABCGAA) and the subsequent broader mandate in 2019 for 10,000 officers of a standing corps, paved the way for the Agency's operations to expand into third countries, including Western Balkan countries and increasingly into African countries, under the status agreements. (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2016; Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi, 2022).

4.5 Libya and Central Mediterranean Cooperation (2017–2025)

A particular externalisation aspect is the EU, and more specifically Italy, cooperation with the Libyan authorities on maritime interception. The EU has also financed and trained the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept and return migrant boats to Libyan waters before they reach EU waters, as detailed in the widely reported practice that began with the 2017 Italy–Libya Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (De Genova, 2023; Mountz & Coddington, 2022). The legal scholars have described interception by a third country's coast guard (even if funded, trained and coordinated by the EU) as a tool to avoid rather than fulfill the EU's humanitarian and legal obligations (Moreno-Lax, 2018). Despite all of this, the Central Mediterranean has been the most heavily used single migratory route into the EU over the past decade, with 41% of all irregular crossings during 2023 and approximately 40% during 2025 (Frontex, 2024a, 2025) – the effectiveness of externalized deterrence is limited even where there is maximum cooperation under agreements.

4.6 The New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020–2024)

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, presented by the European Commission on 23 September 2020, aimed to balance solidarity between the member states with stronger external control, which included pre-entry screening, border asylum procedures, as well as a flexible solidarity mechanism that contemplates relocation, financial

support or operational assistance (Garlick & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2021). The EU's Eurostat and Frontex report that political agreement was reached between European Parliament and Council in December 2023 and the Pact was formally adopted on 22 May 2024, with full application to come in June 2026 (ec. europa.eu Eurostat, n.d.; Frontex, 2026).

5. Quantitative Trends: Migratory Pressure and Policy Response, 2015–2025

Table 1 and Figure 1 summarize two complementary indicators of EU migratory pressure over the study period total asylum applications (Eurostat) and irregular border crossings detected at the EU's external borders (Frontex) alongside the principal external policy milestone recorded in each year.

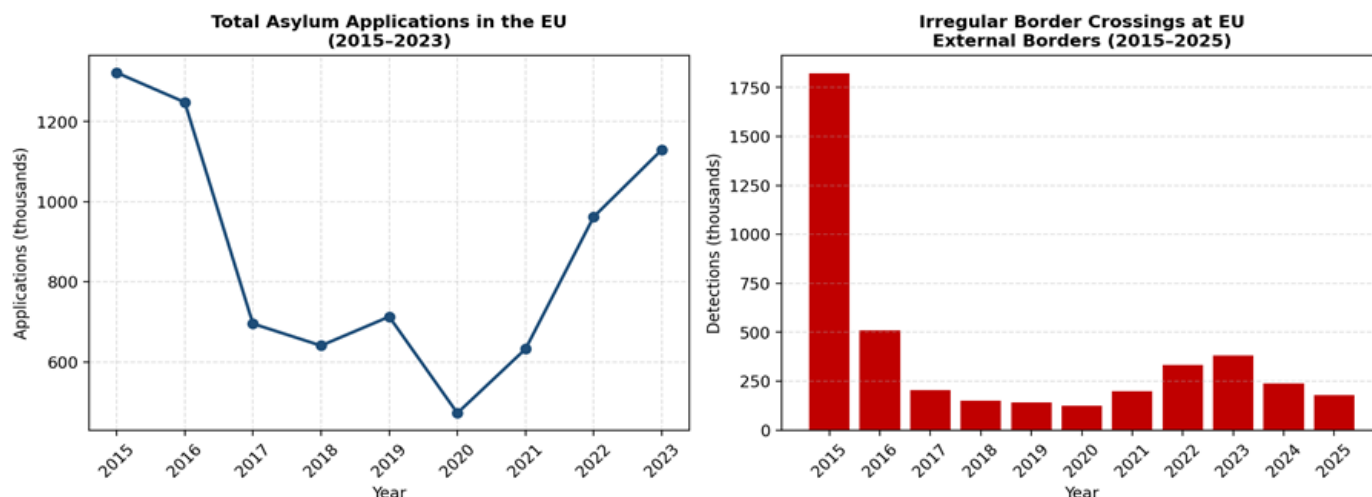
Table 1: EU Asylum Applications, Irregular Border Crossings, and Key External Policy Milestones, 2015–2025

Year	Total Asylum Applications (EU)	Irregular Border Crossings (Frontex)	Key External Policy Milestone
2015	1,322,135	1,822,000	Valletta Summit; EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa launched
2016	1,248,325	511,000	EU–Turkey Statement (18 March 2016)
2017	695,485	204,700	Migration Partnership Framework consolidated
2018	640,735	150,100	Regional Disembarkation Platforms proposal
2019	712,955	141,800	New European Commission mandate on migration
2020	472,395	124,000	COVID-19 border closures; New Pact proposed (Sept.)
2021	632,405	200,000	Afghanistan crisis; EU resettlement pledges
2022	962,160	332,000	Temporary Protection Directive activated for Ukraine (4.3M+ statuses)
2023	1,129,795	380,000	Political agreement on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (Dec.)
2024	n/a (partial)	239,000	New Pact on Migration and Asylum formally adopted (22 May)
2025	n/a (partial)	178,000	Continued decline; EU Pact implementation preparations

Note. Asylum application figures from Eurostat (Consilium.europa.eu, n.d.; Eurostat, 2023, 2024). Irregular border crossing figures from Frontex annual risk analyses and news releases (Frontex, 2024a, 2024b, 2025, 2026); figures are rounded and preliminary for the most recent years.

Figure 1: *EU external migration pressure indicators, 2015–2025. Sources: Eurostat asylum statistics and Frontex annual risk analyses.*

Figure 1. EU External Migration Pressure Indicators, 2015–2025



From this data one can clearly see two patterns. First, asylum applications and irregular crossings are not necessarily linked exclusively to policy interventions; the sharp drop from 2016 to 2019 was a result of the EU–Turkey Statement, Western Balkan route closure and cooperation with the Libyan coast guard, but the trough in 2020 was more due to COVID-19 travel restrictions than to policy design considerations (Boswell & Bialasiewicz, 2021). Second, even though the externalization architecture has been strengthened, the migration resurgence in 2022–2023 is recorded as 962,160 and 1,129,795 applications, respectively, indicating that the containment instruments have not been significantly influential on migratory flows, and that these continue to be strongly affected by conditions in origin and transit countries (Green & Jones, 2024). Deterrence efforts against smuggling networks and new partnerships with departure and transit countries have been cited as the reason for the drop in irregular crossings in the last 2024–2025 period, which saw a decrease of 38% and another 26% respectively (Frontex, 2025, 2026).

An interesting exception in this context is how the EU has responded to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Council promptly put into effect the dormant Temporary Protection Directive – adopted in 2001 – which grants protection status to Ukrainian nationals immediately, without the need for an individual asylum procedure, within days. At the end of 2022, there were more than 4.3 million TPs registered, of which approximately 3.8 million

people were still registered at the end of the year (Eurostat, 2023). This fast-track, mass, low-bureaucracy response contrasts sharply with the years-long procedure that is generally the case for asylum-seekers from Syria, Afghanistan and Sub-Saharan Africa, which has led to scholarly comments on the tendency of EU practice to be selective in its humanitarianism (Thielemann & Dewilde, 2023).

6. Theoretical Debate: Securitization Versus Humanitarian Framing

The above historical development has left a legacy of a long-standing academic debate on the nature of EU external migration policy. Under the Copenhagen School's securitization framework (Buzan et al., 1998) and its application to migrants' movement in Europe by Huysmans (2006), externalisation can be seen as a security project, that is, a project in which migration is discursively represented as an existential threat that warrants extraordinary measures – biometric surveillance, offshore interception, detention infrastructure that are essential to the security project (De Genova, 2023; Guild, 2015, 2017).

A second strand, inspired by the governance-through-resilience thesis of Chandler (2011) and the political sociology of humanitarianism of Barnett and Weiss (2011), has proposed that humanitarian discourse is a legitimating framework that makes restrictive practices politically and morally acceptable, but not necessarily securist in nature. The two concepts of humanitarian government as a

moral economy of deservingness (Fassin, 2012) and critique of humanitarian exceptionalism (Ticktin, 2011) both indicate that care and control are not separable but co-constitutive parts of humanitarian government, as seen in the search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and their use to inform return programmes based on deservingness (Cusumano, 2023; Mountz & Coddington, 2022).

The evidence presented in this article supports a synthesis position and challenges the assumption that securitization and humanitarianism represent mutually exclusive modes of analysis. On the contrary, there is evidence that they have come together structurally in the EU's practice since 2015, as humanitarian frames are used as sources of normative support to policy instruments whose operational logic is predominantly securitizing (Kocher, 2019; Scott-Smith, 2016).

7. Structural Shocks and Policy Coherence: Brexit, COVID-19, and Ukraine

Between 2016 and 2025, three more shocks have challenged and remolded the European Union's approach to external migration. The Brexit referendum in 2016 and the subsequent withdrawal of the UK from the EU brought a traditionally limited and limiting voice to EU asylum negotiations, and also made fewer member states available for future solidarity through relocations, which are more about internal harmonization. Brexit referendum in 2016 and the UK's subsequent withdrawal from the EU indirectly reinforced the preference of member states for externalized, sovereignty-preserving solutions over internal harmonization, removing a voice that was historically more restrictive and limiting in EU asylum negotiations (Geddes & Scholten, 2019; Thym, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021) added another securitizing layer to the increase in migration controls, as emergency border closures and health-screening requirements were added to existing migration controls, which in turn temporarily lowered asylum applications (472,395 in 2020, the lowest on the decade) and irregular crossings (approx. 124,000) (Boswell & Bialasiewicz, 2021; Kesselring & Penninx, 2022). Triandafyllidou (2022) asserts that the digital surveillance and biometric tracking system of the pandemic era lingered long after the public health crisis to become part of broader border management

over time.

Lastly, the EU's ability to respond to political crises with quick and generous measures when politics and strategic interest are aligned, and the comparative generosity with respect to other displaced populations in the event of a war like in Ukraine, were proven in the course of the 2022 war in Ukraine (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2023). Overall, these shocks demonstrate that the EU's external migration policy has emerged more as an adaptation to crisis situations than through systematic, well-designed processes, which is reflected in the growing use of the concepts of resilience governance and executive empowerment in conditions of normative ambiguity (Bourbeau, 2017; Scipioni, 2024).

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Through this historical reconstruction it becomes clear that the EU's external migration policy is not something that suddenly appeared in 2015 but the result of institutional developments since the 1985-Schengen Agreement, which culminated in the Amsterdam Treaty, the 2005 Global Approach to Migration and the 2011 Global Approach to Migration and Mobility. Scale, urgency and institutional consolidation: the EU-Turkey Statement, the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the enlarged mandate of Frontex and eventually the New Pact on Migration and Asylum are the most significant steps in European migration governance since the launch of the Common European Asylum System.

The evidence here presented suggests that this institutional merging has correlated with – but not always been a direct cause of – significant real fluctuations in migratory pressure between the 2015 peak of 1.3-million applications and the pandemic era lows of 2020, and the resurgence in 2022–2023. The parallel treatment of Ukrainian and other displaced populations also demonstrates that the EU's historical path of externalisation has not been defined by a consistent rejection of its humanitarian commitments, but by their more and more selective and conditional use.

For the policy makers, it seems that it is an obvious lesson: in June 2026, the full application of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum should take place whilst operating in an institutional and normative legacy of externalization practice which has been inherited over the past decade. The question of

whether the Pact marks a more political turn towards solidarity or the next step in the institutionalization of containment, as the previous agreements have been, is of course an open and relevant one for the future of European migration governance, and will be explored in the empirical chapters that follow in this dissertation.

From this historical analysis there are three broad implications. The same basic policy template (financial or political incentives in exchange for third-country cooperation on containment and readmission) is present in all four cases (Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, Mauritania), indicating that the use of externalization has become an institutionalized policy default, rather than a rare crisis response (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2024). Second, the EU's rapid response to protect Ukrainian displacement as compared to its more ponderous and conditional response to other displaced groups suggests that humanitarian power, as manifested in the EU, is distributed unevenly across geopolitical and geographical proximity, which aligns with Fassin's (2012) concept of the moral economy of deservingness (Thielemann & Dewilde, 2023).

Third, a high level of migratory pressure in areas of externalization cooperation, such as the Central Mediterranean, reflects the fact that containment measures appear to be more about shifting the risk and costs of migration than about tackling the drivers of displacement (Bilger & Philipp, 2017; De Haas & Dijkzeul, 2023).

The study suffers from the limitations of a qualitative, documentary design, using only EU statistics and secondary academic papers, rather than confidential negotiating documents to draw conclusions, and not conducting extensive quantitative modelling of causal relationships between individual instruments and migratory outcomes. The historical framework developed here will be enriched and tested by the results of semi-structured interviews with EU officials, humanitarian practitioners and migration experts in future empirical chapters of this research, which will allow for a constructivist analysis of humanitarian power to be reported back to their daily experience within institutions tasked with the making of EU external migration policy.

Conflict of Interest

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