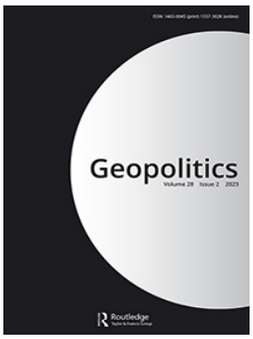

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Towards a Global Urban Geopolitics: Inhabiting Violence

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special section explores geopolitical dimensions of conflict and violence in cities, pointing at the need to continue learning from marginal urban settings. It broadens the scope across differentiated approaches, such as the francophone and anglophone urban geopolitical traditions. By opening up a wider perspective, the emphasis is not on cities as part of a matrix of global hierarchies of geographical power but on the multiscalar relational significance of urban geopolitical inquiry. The introduction positions the special section articles within a wider review of urban geopolitical provocations outlining a new political vocabulary of urban conflict and violence. It concludes with a general call for a methodological and empirical broadening of the field of urban geopolitics as part of a broader de-colonial social and spatial science research agenda bridging the disciplines of political geography, urban studies, architecture and planning.

Introduction

This introduction to the special section advances debates about conflict and space in cities from an urban geopolitical global perspective. The collection of articles continues this ongoing venture by offering different relational visions of what has been labelled as part of the global urban South-East (Watson 2012; Yiftachel 2006) or characterised as marginal urban geopolitics (Rokem and Boano 2018). Hence, we do not only suggest a new urban ontology that moves beyond Euro-American centrism but we likewise wish to add a relational understanding of the contested nature cities are developing across and within different marginal settings. As such, it is not only the geographical location of a city in question that matters but it is the relations to hierarchies of global and local political power that define its significance for urban geopolitical inquiry. In this spatio-political framework, there are several interrelated forces restructuring global and regional inequalities. In parallel, this leads to a surge in ethnic and racial populist

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identity politics and an interweaving of global geopolitics with local events (Ingram 2019). It has been suggested that these complex power relations can be captured in *double polarisations* – defined by the multiscalar axis of political violence in cities infused by conflicts between neo-national leaders vis-à-vis metropolitan elites (Yiftachel and Rokem 2021).

Particularly important for this urban geopolitical scholarly project, and exemplified in this special section, is that urban violence has not only direct spatial implications but that it is inhabited at various interconnected political scales: global, territorial, state, urban and human. Their geographical scopes stretch from the localised sites of citizen contestation and micro-struggles to the global networks of terror with different modes of visibility and intelligibility (Pavoni and Tulumello 2020). Such conflicts transform land uses, territorial arrangements, urban processes and human settlement patterns according to temporalities that range from short-lived states of emergency to the *longue durée* of chronic violence, permanent occupations and predatory urbanisms (Boano 2016).

Urban geopolitics tackles a broader spectrum of urban conflicts and their diverse global geopolitical interconnections. These include but are not limited to the extreme cases of the militarisation of urban space (Graham 2004) divided cities (Allegra, Casaglia, and And 2012) – Asian and Middle Eastern spectacular urbanism (Koch 2018); Eastern European geopolitical fault-line cities (Gentile 2020) and, more generally, the extensive range of urban conflicts in post-war cities worldwide (Elfversson, Gusic, and Höglund 2019).

In this introduction, we suggest that it is timely to start learning from and compare across different urban geopolitical sites (Abu Lughod 2007) utilising *intra-urban comparisons* (McFarlane, Silver, and Truelove 2017) and advocating staging comparisons in terms of *problematics* (Sidaway et al. 2016) exposing one urban context's relational and contrastive relevances to a range of other cities (Robinson 2016; Rokem 2016a). We argue that it is appropriate to start learning from and compare across different geopolitical contexts. Indicating instead towards numerous anglse, from which to explore the ever-expanding range of conflicts, contestations and cultural formations shaping our de-colonial global urban present.

With the aim of re-engaging with the sub-field of urban geopolitics in its current juncture, in the next section we outline the relevance of bringing geopolitics into the mainstream of urban studies. Thereafter, we point to some of what we envisage as new urban geopolitical settings and agendas. Next, we demarcate a need for a global geopolitical vocabulary of urban violence, situating special section papers within a wider debate on urban geopolitical provocations. Finally, we conclude with a general call for a methodological and empirical broadening of the emerging field of urban geopolitics as a de-colonial research agenda bridging the disciplines of political geography, urban studies, architecture and planning.

Urbanising Geopolitics

Urban geopolitics encompasses a multiplicity of approaches broadly engaging with violence and warfare in cities. Since the early 2000s, it has largely engaged with the multiscalar contested links between global geopolitical events and specific acts of violence towards cities and their inhabitants (Graham 2004, 191). Despite the increasing prevalence of post-colonial and de-colonial scholarship within the wider academy, today's dominant critical approaches remain rooted in a largely Euro-American perspective and focus overwhelmingly on the historical condition of a distinctly 'north-western' modernity. The sub-field of urban geopolitics has predominantly emerged from this Euro-American academic literature, where scholars have endeavoured to offer a richer account of how expansive geopolitical process impacts urban violence and conflict across geographical scales (Fregonese 2012; Graham 2010; Rokem and Boano 2018).

In anglophone scholarship, the conventional geopolitical research agenda has re-scaled from its predominant occupation with global and national power relations and state borders, to a focus on cities as powerful geopolitical actors and targets of state warfare and violence (Kaldor and Sassen 2020). It should not come as a surprise that all-encompassing gloomy visualisations of fortified gated enclaves, and sites of terror, and surveillance are at the spotlight of urban geopolitics (Sidaway 2018, 235). This dystopian narration of the sub-field has been dominated by a case study-oriented approach exposing the complexity of everyday sectarian and military violence both towards and within cities (Graham 2010). To capture this open-ended debate, we embrace the term geopolitics with a double meaning. It binds together international relations across geographical scales and the political praxis of statecraft and its *problematique* (Dittmer and Sharp 2014). Thus, conjoining a broader politics of space and time, highlighting its structural and conflictive dimensions within the expanding geographies of the urban. To echo Ó Tuathail (1999, 107) positing "geography is always, therefore, (geo)political as it problematises the geographical 'structures of [the] power and knowledge in question'. This is approached in different ways in the Francophone and Anglophone urban geopolitical traditions and their marked dissimilarities, the former taking the question of scale and political spheres in which urban geopolitics operates more flexibly (see Amarouche, Charmes, and Rousseau 2021) while the later predominantly concentrating on sectarian and nationally infused violence in cities (Graham 2010; Rokem et al. 2017).

The Francophone and Anglophone urban geopolitical approaches both stem from a Euro-American perspective. Moving into new terrain, this collection brings to the fore a combination of the political dimension of contestation and violence and their engagement with a proliferation of urban conflicts in Sarajevo and Belgrade (Bădescu 2022), Lyon and Rabat (Amarouche,

Charmes, and Rousseau 2021) Dnipro and Kharkiv (Gentile 2020) and Jerusalem Shtern and Rokem (2021). In so doing, we aim to enable a growing interest in assembling relational connections across numerous local sites and opening up intellectual boundaries, questioning the positioning of post-colonial theory within the social sciences enduring methodological nationalism and euro-centric academic knowledge production (Robinson 2016; Santos 2014).

A call for a global urban geopolitics becomes not a demand for any universal framework rather 'a global gaze, focused on the inequalities rooted in global phenomena such as capitalism and colonialism, with a focus on interstices, where a number of different factors can intervene, creating specific intersections of oppressions that are not universal' (Challand and Bottici 2021, 6). Moreover, research on violence asserts that its intensity goes well beyond physical harm. While suggesting there is no agreed definition of urban violence, Pavoni, and Tulumello (2020:49) warn us against the oversimplification of such complex relations, especially when the adjective 'urban' is just 'referring to the place (the container) in which instances of violence would occur, rather than as a spatial process constitutive to it'. Challenging simultaneously 'the static understanding of the urban and the exogenous understanding of violence' (ibid: 50) contemporary urban and capitalist-urban discourses are 'framing urban violence as an exogenous anomaly to be eradicated, [and] generate the pervasive atmospheres of fear that increasingly characterise contemporary urban space' (ibid: 51). For example, the military doctrine to obliterate the built environment and wipe-out all life supporting infrastructures in cities is posited by Coward (2009, 14) as 'urbcide' – 'the destruction of buildings as a condition of possibility of being with others'. This extreme form of total urban warfare is becoming the norm rather than the exception, with several cities enduring this absolute violence against the everyday functionality of human existence. Some of the recent prevalent examples include cities in the Balkans, Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Syria and more recently the Ukraine and Sudan taking centre stage.

Bringing Geopolitics into the Mainstream of Urban Studies

This collection of papers and several others which did not make it through the review process, stems from two sessions held at the RC21 conference in Leeds in Autumn 2016.[1] This is part of a larger endeavour by the authors to advance the exploration of a global urban geopolitics. This project was partly prolonged due to the COVID-19 crisis, yet has continued to advance across several research endeavours, conferences and public talks. In this special section, we aim to continue this collective project by advancing theoretical and empirical debates concerning the politics of space from an urban global geopolitical comparative perspective and building on this introduction authors former

edited volume *Urban Geopolitics: Rethinking Planning in Contested Cities* (Rokem and Boano 2018). In this new collection, we seek to further define and explore the expanding world of cities across interconnected scales moving away from a deterministic view of the incommensurability of cases from diverse regional settings and expend comparative research of *urban difference* (McFarlane and Robinson 2012; Rokem 2016a).

The research agenda we propose to expand here aims to capture the proliferation of ethnic, racial, gender and class conflicts revolving around questions of housing, infrastructure, mobility, accessibility and identity in the world of cities (Rokem 2016b).

Moving beyond the colonial and capitalist dominant academic perspectives and the assumption that large regional cultural blocks exist and can be researched in isolation from one another (Challand and Bottici 2021). As such, it is in the breakdown of regional geographical blocks and a focus on the specificity of the location of a given city that matters. Hence, we propose that it is rather the matrix of global and local hierarchies of spatio-political domination and the *double polarisations* of neo-national and urban elites (Yiftachel and Rokem 2021) that define the significance of any urban geopolitical investigation. In this open-ended global framework, several interrelated forces restructure urban and regional inequalities, and in parallel infuse new waves of ethnic and racial populist identity politics, conflict and violence. This becomes even more evident given the tightening of border controls and advanced surveillance technologies utilised to enforce COVID-19 lockdowns in cities worldwide (Ali, Connolly, and Keil 2022).

More broadly geopolitics can be traced back to the early 1900s and includes several diverging and overlapping narrations (Agnew 2003), in the early days classic geopolitics took centre stage betrothing the influence of physical geography on political decision-making dominating much of the strategic war mongering of the early 20th Century (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992). Critical geopolitics emerged as a response to the emergence of post-structuralist and post-colonial approaches in political geography. It questioned the perception of geography as a passive setting in global decision-making, scrutinising the socially fabricated cultural determinism of classic geopolitics and containing a multiplicity of voices, incorporating gender, racial, indigenous and postcolonial critiques (Dodds 2009).

Advanced by scholars interested in the wider dimensions of urban political geography, the sub-field of urban geopolitics has lacked a clearly defined or internally coherent theory or research agenda. It is rather a set of intradisciplinary approaches that borrow particularly, but not exclusively, from a heterogeneous interdisciplinary engagement among others, political geography, urban studies, planning, architecture, sociology, anthropology and peace and conflict studies. While it is inherently interdisciplinary, it can be defined by its theoretical and

methodological underpinnings which emphasise an urban vocabulary linking global geopolitical process with contested politics and violence in cities (Graham 2004, 2010). It is multi scalar in its nature and pays attention to both micro-level urban geographies and macro-level global political transformations.

There is no clear distinction between different strands of urban geopolitics. The sub-field in English-speaking academia includes a range of works that explicitly address different contestation and violent power dynamics in cities (Rokem et al. 2017). The key attribute of urban geopolitics more generally is that it is not a theory-based approach – there is no 'urban geopolitical' grand theory or theories. The concerns of urban geopolitics are local and case study with a present-oriented outlook; unlike the more established well-defined distinction between classic and critical geopolitics (Dittmer and Sharp 2014), urban geopolitics engages less with the interactions of international relations and state craft. Instead, it uncovers the everyday messy technologies of power relations in cities and their connections with global, national and regional scales of political violence and spatial control.

An important distinction is the different conceptualisation of urban geopolitics in English and French-speaking scholarships. These diverging traditions stem from different academic worldviews and hold distinctive ontological claims. The Francophone approach emerged from Yves Lacoste's (2012) seminal writings in the French journal Hérodote and is known as 'la géopolitique urbaine', this strand is more flexible in its classification and with no specific privileged scale in mind. A lesser prominence is put on urban conflict and division as the main determining factors, and more emphasis is given to territorial control and access to resources which could be applied across scales and political power relations (for a detailed review of the differences between the English and French urban geopolitical approaches see special section paper; Amarouche, Charmes, and Rousseau 2021).

The anglophone strand of urban geopolitics has its root's stemming from the divided cities research and its preoccupation with ethno-national conflicts and their impact on the urban scale. This is predominantly based on disputed capital cities in the West (Hepburn 2004). The divided cities strand continues to expand in recent years, although it mainly concentrates on the manifestation of a selected number of iconic ethno-national sectarian conflicts at the urban scale. 'Classic' examples include Jerusalem, Belfast, Sarajevo, Nicosia and Beirut, etc. (Allegra, Casaglia, and Rokem2012;. The internal logic of the 'divided' cities is inherently concerned with sovereignty and control (Davis and De Duren 2011), and the central question determining the conflict derives from a questioning of the nation state legitimacy to exist by a dominant ethnic minority group (Anderson 2008).

A Global Geopolitical Vocabulary of Urban Violence

Most of the literature published in influential urban academic circles usually stems from Euro-American cases with limited examples from other world regions (Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013). So far, urban geopolitical research has taken new directions investigating and comparing a range of non-Euro-American case (Rokem and Boano 2018) atmospheres (Fregonese 2017) and migration (Kutz and Wolff 2022). Despite this growing interest, the sub-field is relatively underdeveloped in the Anglophone academic literature and is mainly published in two prominent journals (Geopolitics and Political Geography) jointly having published just over a dozen papers with *urban geopolitics* in their article titles to date. Including the publications forming part of this special section, all engaging with case studies from marginal world regions which are relatively unrepresented in which could be framed as producing peripheral empirical knowledge.

Others have highlighted the importance of the geopolitical power of cities in opposing and challenging the neo-nationalist state, thereby buttressing their position as sites of progressive politics (Nyers 2011). A case in point is sanctuary cities prevalent in the U.S. and Europe – where city officials are prohibited from inquiring into residents' citizenship status (Bagelman 2016). In cases of growing polarisations between urban and national agendas, such as immigration, housing, economic and environmental issues, one can note the apparent conflicting policy and even legal trajectories, in what has been termed fledgling urban sovereignty (Barber 2017), or urban foreign policy (Hobbs 1994, 18).

Key to our discussion is the process of *double polarisation*, and the emergence of populist neo-national politics (Yiftachel and Rokem 2021). This process is characterised by the actions of prominent leaders such as Hungary's Viktor Orban, Poland's Mateusz Morawiecki, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Turkey's Taipe Erdoğan, India's Narendra Modi, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, and until recently UK's Boris Johnson, and USA's Donald Trump, to mention just a few prominent figures. In almost all cases, their politics draw on support from country regions (including small and medium-sized cities) as they stand in tension with the major premises and projects of metropolitan society (albeit receiving some support from several groups within the metropolis). A prominent example of urban geopolitical opposition is the case of the mayors of the Visegrad capitals (Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and Bratislava) who have come together in an effort to fight the erosion of democracy by their populist governments.

This special section introduction draws inspiration from Sidaway et al. (2016) propositions to 'plunge into new areas, leaving a disciplinary comfort zone, with familiar literatures, paradigms and people, to think, present and publish comparatively, venturing into reconfigured area studies communities

or across disciplines, where we are in less secure territory' (ibid, 786). As such, we explore a diverse group of 'contested' and 'ordinary' cities (Bădescu 2022; Rokem 2016a) and the ways global and local restructuring highlight transnational entanglements beyond the Euro-American conceptual and political boundaries. In the next section, we explore a variety of regional cases from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. These distinct perspectives brought together in the four special section articles form a group of international empirically grounded cases broadening what we frame as a more plural and marginal urban geopolitics.

Urban Geopolitical Provocations

In the next section, we outline the four papers in this special section and take a fresh look at local complexities allowing for a more plural urban geopolitical knowledge production. These diverse urban sites located in different regional settings expose some of the intimate local manifestations taking place in cities. Such local processes highlight the significance of everyday ordinary concealed violent actions such as disinformation, daily encounters, hostile urban policies and relationships between local elites, international actors and urban space, all shaping the geopolitics of a conflict of the city/ies in question. These often elusive (at least to the outsider's eye) distinctive urban practices allow for the emergence of a more intimate and detailed scrutiny of violently charged local sites (Fregonese 2018, XXX) and their interplay with global geopolitical events (Ingram 2019) and the wider logic of urban intergroup violence (Rokem, Wiess and Miodownik 2018).

The collective argument interwoven throughout the four papers in this special section advances the ongoing work of broadening and bridging urban geopolitics in multiple regional and comparative directions. This is especially significant with the current developments on the Eastern European frontier and the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The Ukrainian cities at the frontline in the Donbas have suffered a heavy military campaign of 'urbecide' determined to inflict a complete inhalation of civilian infrastructure and their everyday use by the local population. Prior to the February 2022 Russian invasion, a campaign of (dis/mis-) information was employed and has been is an indispensable ingredient in the development of the concept of the *geopolitical fault-line city*, the empirical substance of which Gentile's (2020) text engages with based on the case of two strategically crucial cities in Ukraine: Kharkiv and Dnipro both currently experiencing Russian military violence against civilian targets. The results show that the categories of 'Ukrainian' and 'Russian' are of relatively little salience in the case study cities, contrary to the (now slowly fading) narrative of ethnic polarisation that has been haunting many academic and especially media

portrayals of Ukraine. What matters, instead, is self-identification as 'European' or 'Soviet', imaginary supranational communities that are geopolitical at heart.

Bădescu (2022) engages with the urban geopolitical significance of learning from the European Southeast and more specifically takes a closer look at the historical and contemporary regional conflicts shaping two different cities in the Balkans. By employing a place biography approach and a critical geopolitical analysis, the paper discusses the reconfiguration of urban space as a nexus of geopolitical regional processes: Sarajevo, arguably a divided city in a contested state, and Belgrade and 'ordinary' uncontested capital of a country with contested spaces. Through the cases examined, Bădescu argues that the flows of capital and the displays of power reflect a configuration of relationships between local elites, international actors and urban space that can be read using a postcolonial frame, putting forwards the ambiguous and ambivalent role of the Balkans in wider global debates on urban geopolitics.

Tackling the longstanding void between the dominant Francophone and English versions of urban geopolitics, Amarouche, Charmes, and Rousseau (2021) suggest we can learn from contrasting English and French urban geopolitical approaches. The aim is to fill this gap by analysing a similar urban spatial policy in the 'global north' and 'global south' and the creation of *green belts* in the peripheries of large cities. Comparing Lyon and Rabat, they suggest learning across different cities allows an analysis of French and English approaches to urban geopolitics. The comparison of greenbelts in both contexts shows that the English approach is more relevant to analyse state-led interventions at the urban scale in Rabat. Whilst the French approach helps to comprehend how the fight against sprawl may serve particular interests of the local urban elite (especially that of urban developers in Lyon).

The extent to which 'geographies of encounter' facilitate tolerance to diversity and difference has long been a source of debate in urban studies and human geography scholarship. However, as Shtern and Rokem (2021) note, to date, this contestation has focused primarily on hyper-diverse EuroAmerican cities. Adapting this urban vocabulary to the volatile conditions of the nationally contested city, the paper explores intergroup encounters between Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem. The authors propose that despite an active ethnonational conflict, the structural forces shaping the urban geopolitics of encounter from above, and spatial conditions on the ground, can push the rival communities into unplanned, asymmetric yet ongoing daily intergroup interactions. Beyond Jerusalem, the authors suggest that such structural analysis can serve to ground the scholarship of urban encounters in the deeper, broader geopolitical realities that enable them. In a broader sense, as many cities worldwide experience a resurgence of ethnonationalism, thus, illuminating the structural production of encounter may demarcate a broader function for reading contemporary urban geopolitics.

The vision of urban geopolitics as a research agenda, contributes to what can be seen as an increasingly urgent and crucial enquiry, given the dramatic and desolate perspectives with which we are presented in contemporary world history, considering the total lack of effective response to disintegration and destruction in a lengthening list of cases from Sarajevo to Aleppo (Safier 2018, 233) and more recently Ukrainian and Afghan cities with Mariupol constituting one of the tragic victims of all-embracing urbicide (Gentile 2022). This brings us to question the need for a more nuanced understanding of the value of comparing urban difference, suggesting there is a growing need to adjust our vocabularies attributed to cities and neighbourhoods to better conceptualise and adapt policy and practice to tackle some of the harsh realities we are witnessing in an ever more fractured ordinary urban geopolitical existence (Rokem 2018, 62).

Conclusions

This introduction to the four special section articles offers creative pathways to continue the journey of expanding urban geopolitical inquiry. It adds to the development of the sub-field by distinguishing geopolitical transformations from different world regions exposing unique local processes and configurations of violence and conflict that contribute to the project of decentring urban geopolitics as part of a wider de-colonial social science research agenda. The continued learning from urban difference and the reshaping of material and immaterial urban geopolitics practices highlights the transnational and global entanglements beyond the Euro-American conceptual and geographical divide. It moves away from the dominant spatial fix of regional and cultural blocks in geography and urban studies to an open-ended global urban geopolitical vocabulary. In other words, it's not the location of any specific city that matters but its connection to wider hierarchies of global power and domination.

As such, cities interface several scales of geopolitics and are often detached from their regional hinterlands. Moving away from a regional geographical focus to one that highlights disproportionate global hierarchies of privilege and power and the interlinkages of global events and the inhabitation of local violence is precisely one of the strengths of urban geopolitical inquiry. In the cases covered in this special section urban contestations are bound up with violence at local, regional, and national scales. Here, violence arises not merely from contested process of capitalist urbanisation and the operational materialities these portray over urban spaces (Pavoni and Tulumello 2020) it is more a consideration of tensions between wider ethno-national and neo-national politics, and how this plays out in micro-scale experiences and narratives on the everyday and ordinary lives of those coping with the global geopolitical impacts on life in cities.

The potential for deactivating violence lies in the everyday resistance or in inhabitation intended as 'counter territorialisation' (Boano and Astolfo 2020) in a 'politics of inhabitation' (Abourahme 2020, 40). People's practices are a multiform remaking of spatial ordering of state sanctioned planned violence that intentionally produces capital accumulation, expulsions, pandemic lockdowns, and marginalisation. Thus, raising further tensions between the geopolitics of national governments and how this has been utilised to enforce COVID-19 lockdowns in cities worldwide (Ali, Connolly, and Keil 2022).

We place this collection of essays as yet another contribution to expand urban geopolitical research and thinking about the changing nature of cities. We, especially, consider connotations concerning emerging threats from varied and destabilising combinations of global, regional and local urban inequalities and populist national governments. Safier (2018, 232) asserts there are two ways to respond to this danger; one based on retraction, featured by exclusionist, intolerant and even destructive responses; and the other, based on active engagement, endured by cosmopolitan inclusion and coexistence, whereby cities would be central arenas in which these global geopolitical conflicts and reconciliations reinhabit and accumulate defused violence. By establishing a comparative conversation of what we can learn from different urban contexts, there is abundant potential for methodological and empirical broadening of the emerging field of urban geopolitics. The aim is to uncover, map and interpret the multiplicity of forces and increasing manifestations of conflict, terror and everyday violence in cities and their multiple global as well as local geopolitical significance.

Note

1. The papers in this themed issue result from the RC21 Conference session in Leeds (2016): *Towards a Global Urban Geopolitics: Bringing Geopolitics into the Mainstream of Comparative Urban Studies*, convened by the special section editors.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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