
Planning and policing of public demonstrations: A case study

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Abstract

One of the biggest political events that took place in Portugal since the Carnation Revolution in April 1974 occurred on 15 September 2012. It was a time when the consequences of the financial crisis hit the majority of the citizens, and the government announced a tax modification, along with several austerity measures. Accordingly, a group of citizens launched a national protest on the internet called 'To hell with the Troika! We want our lives!'. A few days later, around 23 000 people had said 'I'll go' on the Facebook page. Given these kinds of groups, the police had some difficulty to find credible representatives to speak with to adequately plan and execute the policing operation. This event, promoted by organisations outside the traditional political system, has constituted a challenge for the police regarding the constitutional rights of assembly, demonstration, and security and public peace maintenance. This demonstration constitutes the case study to be presented. The main goals are: to describe the police planning and implementation procedures; to analyse the dos and don'ts; and to get some lessons to be learned. Using a qualitative approach, police documents, and interviews with police officers and commanders involved in the policing operation were analysed through a content analysis procedure. Triangulation of data sources and timeline was made. Results are presented in a timeline, enabling the assessment of the whole operation, mainly the management of the information flows and the uncertainty of the goings-on on the field.

Keywords

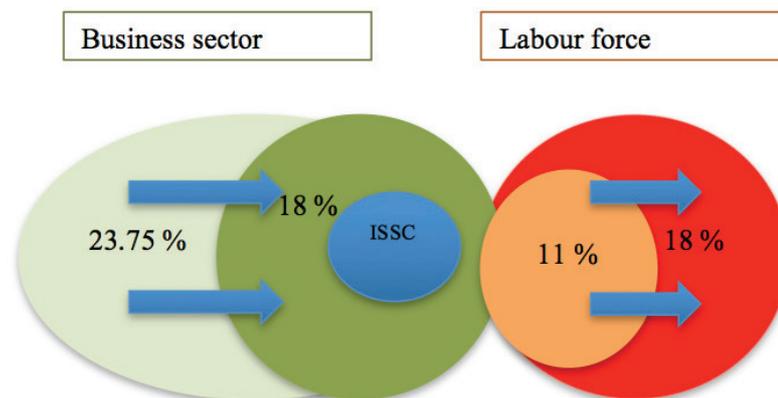
Mass protest policing, decision-making, security, planning, training

Introduction

In 2012, Portugal was under a deep economic and financial crisis, and as a result, an external financial intervention was given by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the *Troika*, as the Portuguese people have named it. The demonstration on 15 September 2012 is a milestone in the recent history of Portuguese political protest. Considering the demonstrators' participation, it was the major political protest since the Carnation Revolution held in 1974. This protest occurred in the main Portuguese cities as a reaction to the announced reforms of the Single Social Tax.

On 7 September 2012, the Prime Minister announced changes in the form of calculating the Single Social Tax, reducing the contribution of the business sector and as a compensatory measure increasing the contribution of the labour force (see figure 1). This generated a strong reaction in society and led to the rupture within the governmental coalition.

Figure 1 — Government proposal to change ISSC scheme in 2012



The public perception of the contradiction between the government and the population, as well as the internal divergence within the governmental majority, was a key factor for the success of the mobilisation process.

The cultural frame made by the movement 'To hell with the Troika! We want our lives!' presented the Troika and the austerity policy as public enemies. The accomplishment of this mobilisation was essentially due to the social resonance of precariousness and austerity because many Portuguese families were clearly facing its effects. Social media gave a new empowerment to a novel generation of activists formed by unemployed and by precarious workers with higher education profile, which means they have the know-how to mobilise and organise a protest, replacing political parties or unions. This new kind of mobilisation

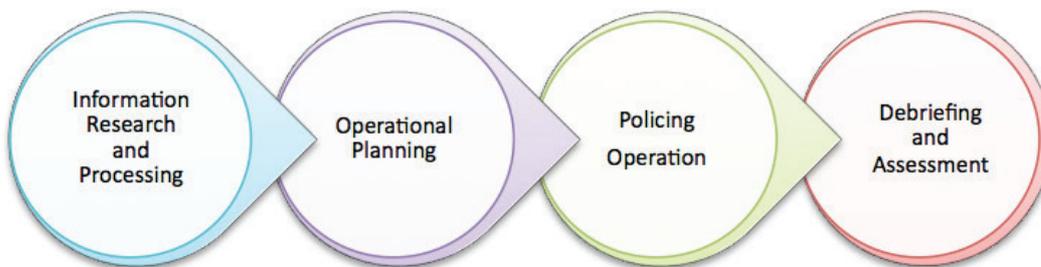
had obvious consequences for the policing operation planning, as there were no credible representatives to speak with.

In brief, this is what happens in Portuguese major events' security: As always, police focus the attention on the security of the events and the town. According to an interviewed police officer, it is important '*... to achieve the objectives of the organisers — the right to demonstrate — but at the same time to balance these objectives with other activities in the city, and citizens' rights*' (Interview 1).

Police had to adapt to the challenges of a globalised world, where technology and new forms of protest have a strong impact in public order strategies and tactics. Police intervention, indeed, influence protesters' perceptions of the state reaction (della Porta and Reiter, 1995). Nowadays, protest policing appears to be a key issue for the professional self-definition of the police. Police planning has to be flexible and adaptable to unpredictable and uncertain events. One interviewed police officer mentioned that he '*...realized that for events of this nature, where human behaviour is determinant, unpredictability and uncertainty is huge. And so adaptability to circumstances is an added value*' (Interview 1).

The different phases of a security operation (see figure 2) within a large-scale demonstration are: information research and processing; planning; execution; and evaluation/debriefing.

Figure 2 — Phases of a security operation



The communication made by the organisers to the municipality is mandatory. Open sources are constantly analysed for gathering intelligence. The planning is based on meetings between the police and relevant partners. During these preparatory meetings, police support is requested by the organisers because of their lack of experience in organising demonstrations, which can also be considered as an indicator of trust and confidence in the police. To be successful, the exchange of information between the different police branches is crucial to establish the concept of operations and the different modalities of action.

Before the event, the police Commander delivers a briefing to all involved units.

During the event, information about public disorder is immediately transmitted to the commander to make decisions. But often, the 'less is more' rule applies, that is to say, that less information can lead to more effective decisions.

At the debriefing stage, a meeting is held with all police units and if needed with external entities for critical evaluation of the whole process, thus contributing to the adjustment of failures and/or systematisation of good practices.

To sum up, at first the police were supposed to deal with uncertainty. They could envisage the whole situation based on the Portuguese protest history, and respective policing operation, but they had no access to some information they usually have to prepare these kinds of events. The use of new models of mobilisation and advantage taking of perceived political opportunities by a new profile of demonstrators, gave a completely novel picture to the police, having increased uncertainty and transformed all operation. This leaderless protest implied the police had no trustful interlocutors to foresee the big picture. They had no view of what might happen during the event, and this is of great significance for those who have to design the security plan.

This was a peaceful demonstration, despite the enormous amount of participants, it seemed it would be the most suitable event to study the planning and policing procedures. In fact, evaluation was not at stake, thus eliminating a possible biased data collection and analysis. Also, because some time has passed — but not so much that the police interviewees could have forgotten their experience. Last but not least, because some reserved information became available to analysis.

This case study intends to describe the whole policing operation of one of the biggest Portuguese political events. The design, planning and implementation procedures will be addressed, as well as the information management and the decision making process.

Method

Participants

Six male police officers (three Commanders) involved in the police operation, in the areas of operations and intelligence.

Corpus

A set of police documents was gathered to be analysed:

- 1) Two Intelligence Reports;
- 2) A Traffic Control Operation Order;

- 3) An email sent to all the police force the day before the event;
- 4) A First Impression Report, made on the very day of the event; and
- 5) The final Police Report.

Also, data collected by interviewing the police officers, using a guide previously designed for the research purposes, was considered for analysis.

Instruments

Interviews and content analysis.

Procedure

A guide for the interview was designed taking into account the specific purposes of this study. It involves two parts: one regarding the policing of major political events in general; the other considering the event of 15 September 2012. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured and semi-directive way. The police officers appointed to participate in the study were chosen because of their active role in the policing operation. After being invited, they have accepted to participate in the study and gave their written informed consent. The interviews were voice-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

The police documents and the interviews were submitted to a thematic content analysis procedure (e.g. Ghiglione and Matalon, 2001). Data was analysed and codified in categories which were designed for the study, and derived from the collected data. The analytic procedure was open or exploratory. To warrant the analysis quality, triangulation of analysts was made, and other reliability and validity criteria were followed.

Also, a paper about the media perception concerning police activity during political protests in Portugal (Pais, Felgueiras, Rodrigues, Santos and Varela, 2015) was taken into consideration. It addresses the communicational climate during 2012 by analysing the media coverage of major political events policing, namely, the news from the Portuguese News Agency, three major daily newspapers, and three major TV channels.

Results

The results are presented in a timeline, enabling the assessment of the whole policing operation, mainly the information management and the uncertainty of the developments that took place.

The demonstration: Social and political context

In 2011 the financial crisis was ruling the majority of the citizens' daily routines, and framing the actions of social and political actors. By then, a political protest named 'Geração à rasca' (precarious generation), motivated by a cultural frame of precariousness at many levels, set

up a new Portuguese protest dynamics (Felgueiras, 2016b). Lisbon became the epicentre of social discontent and political critique.

On 11 September 2012, at 11H00, there were 22 297 supporters on the Facebook page, which is an abnormal figure in the Portuguese major political events' history, suggesting the demonstration would have a massive participation. Several public figures stated their support to the initiative. Castells (2009) talk about the 'autonomy of the communicating subjects' and stress that 'the construction of communicative autonomy is directly related to the development of social and political autonomy, a key factor in fostering social change' (p. 414).

Media started an intensive coverage of the arrangements for this demonstration, closely following the mobilisation process, while the communicational climate during 2012, especially considering the Portuguese TV channels with major audiences, was one of emphasising the police action during political demonstrations, mainly its results and consequences in terms of arrests and injured people, with the exhibition of images of violent demonstrators being dispersed by force, or detained (Pais et al., 2015). As Castells (2009: 302) put it, 'in the network society, the battle of images and frames, at the source of the battle for minds and souls, takes place in multimedia communication networks'.

All these factors combined with the viral effect of information disseminated through social networks led to a mobilisation that was estimated to be over 600 000 demonstrators, making this event the most attended in Portugal since 1 May 1974.

In fact, only 8 days after the Government's announcement, on 15 September, the demonstration took place in Lisbon. Some other protests occurred in 40 Portuguese cities and Berlin, Barcelona, Brussels, Paris, London, Madrid, and Fortaleza (Brazil). Even today some internet sites still give information about around a million people who have walked out into the streets. Furthermore, the event (in Lisbon) was supposed to end in a symbolic place — Praça de Espanha (Spain Square) — stressing the solidarity with the Spaniards and the political situation they were facing.

Planning and implementing the security operation: Before the event

The information research and processing began as soon as the news of the demonstration was out. An analysis of open sources regarding everything related to the events was carried out by the police, resulting in the Intelligence Reports to feed the police deployment with information⁽¹⁹⁾.

Although several demonstrations were to happen in different Portuguese cities, it was known the demonstrators would come from various parts of Portugal in rented buses to

⁽¹⁹⁾ In 2012 Lisbon Police produced and disseminated a detailed Intelligence Report every 2 days and a half about public demonstrations and radical movements (*source*: Police of Lisbon).

the big demonstration in Lisbon. Information was available in diverse Facebook pages, managed by different promoters, with several messages regarding: the time of assembly; the promoters' intentions; the identification of hotspots; and the adherents' intentions regarding actions to be taken during the events. All this information allowed approaching the degree of acceptance of the cause of the demonstration. Also, the use of ironic or provocative language (sometimes subliminal) made the police be on the watch regarding any violent or disruptive action:

*bring banners, snacks, torches (non-human yet), instruments (musical ones), cocktails (those to drink), cookies, (cinnamon) sticks, water (Portuguese Stone Water or others), and mainly dirty faces [in Portuguese, it is written as *más caras*, and these two words combined mean *máscaras*, or masks]. (Retrieved from the Intelligence Reports)*

Such diverse information coming from so many groups and individuals should have implied a strong coordination between the police and the promoters. Holding meetings between the police and these organisations, intending to exchange useful information, is normal police procedure. However, information about the events was scarce and unreliable. All this had consequences for the police deployment. Also, it allowed for the identification of hotspots along the route.

The Intelligence Reports recommended to pay attention to: individuals and/or groups with a radical agenda; behaviours; mediatisation; direct action; cyber-attacks; actions against government members. Attention was also given to the news of demonstrations in Spain, regarding civil unrest and occupation of symbolic spaces. The majority of demonstrators were centre-left and moderate-right, but people from the most diverse ideologies came to demonstrate against the government-proposed measures. The police contained the extreme-right protesters and assured they also demonstrate.

As time was passing, there was an increasing feeling that the demonstration would be considerable.

The media, the day before the event, talked about 40 to 50 000 people, which has also fallen short of reality. (Interview 6)

The Intelligence Report disseminated the day before the demonstration mentioned the number of participants was estimated to be above 30 000.

For the planning, it was important the cooperation with relevant external entities to solve specific problems (medical emergency, civil protection, urban cleaning, and public transportation). The exchange of information between different police branches was crucial to establish the concept of operations and the modalities of action.

The Police stated to the press that its resources 'would be used gradually and according to the degree of conflict and people's movements, always having in mind the threat levels and the permanent risk assessment' (retrieved from a note to the Portuguese News Agency by the Portuguese Police).

A briefing was carried out with all the police units involved in the operation. A dedicated communications channel was also set up to facilitate the operations. However, according to one of the interviewed police officers, '*... a control room would be of utmost importance, because even in terms of communications, (...) having a space where the information is received, where the decision-makers are, having the conditions to think and to be properly briefed, and to make decisions, (...) to think about what are the human resources and about other options to solve different public order incidents. What are the implications of adopting solution A, B or C, (...) I believe that this is what is missing*' (Interview 1).

Police strategy for the 15 September demonstrations was based on the premise 'high visibility and low-profile policing' (e.g. Adang and Cuvelier, 2001).

Planning and implementing the security operation: During the event

The demonstration under the motto 'To hell with the Troika! We want our lives!', starting at 15H00 and ending at 19H10, was a challenge for the police: there is always a sensitive balance between freedom and security.

Before the demonstration there was a feeling of ambiguity. On the day of the demonstration, it changed into a feeling of surprise, due to a large number of people present in the demonstration. TV was on live broadcast, and this may well have been a supplementary motivation for people to join the event, showing their solidarity with the cause. We live in 'a volatile and liquid society' (Bauman, 2007, p. 12) and protest is influenced by globalisation and social media.

When moving from planning to action, and considering the initial expectations, police commanders became stunned by the huge crowd, and this urged them to reconfigure the security problem. Accordingly, instead of worrying about critical points, violent situations, and incidents between groups, the police had to manage the simple allocation of people on the ground. Where do we put such a huge amount of people? How can we manage their rally in a safe and secure manner?

'When the head of the demonstration arrived at Praça Duque de Saldanha, the police officer ahead told me "it's impossible to gather them all in a traffic lane". And it was. It seemed they were coming from a barrel and they arrived at the muzzle and occupied all the lanes. And we became dry. For a moment we had no capacity to move' (Interview 6).

This demonstration was carried out without major incidents, with the greatest tension being felt in front of the IMF's office, with the bursting of firecrackers, tomatoes and glass bottles thrown at the police. Police had to segregate and control a group of extreme-right demonstrators to avoid confrontations with left-wing and anarchist groups.

At the end of the demonstration, about 3 000 people began a march towards the Parliament, remaining there until 2 a.m. Police means had to be deployed nearby. Some anarchists caused disorder in several commercial areas and stoned and launched pyrotechnics against the police, which led to some arrests. This was a ritualised and symbolic violence that should not be faced by a robust police reaction because these groups were amongst many other citizens who were peacefully demonstrating.

According to one of the interviewed police officers, '*... it came to a point that it already seemed a ritual, which both demonstrators and police officers knew very well. Because the protesters, the radical groups were the same: the slogans, the throwing of railing ... (...) Demonstrators expected the police to behave in a certain way and they themselves also played their role*' (Interview 1).

This day ended thus with an unauthorised demonstration in front of the Parliament, composed of several groups, associated with anarcho-libertarian movements and with several social movements, which previously integrated the demonstration. Despite the attempts of a minority of radicals, the low profile police strategy was widely praised by the media.

Planning and implementing the security operation: After the event

Usually, a debriefing occurs after a police operation like this. As an interviewed said: '*... it is important to make a debriefing, but one that in fact ... which has actionable conclusions, that can be implemented*' (Interview 1).

Discussion

Planning and operational implementation have had to adjust to the increase of traditional protest but also of new forms of protest in recent years, many with tens of thousands of participants, often summoned through new technologies, supporting diverse causes and interests.

In this particular case, the huge amount of adherents to the demonstration turned out to be an element of surprise of utmost importance. Reality imposed itself and transformed the early sense of ambiguity and uncertainty that underlined the initial planning phase. Another security problem emerged due to the reconfiguration of the real scenario. The major issue was then the demonstrators' density, or the dangerous crowd density (Felgueiras, 2016a).

Police adopted flexible and adaptive responses according to the environment — ‘chameleon’ style and tone of policing — which is linked to the ecological rationality (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; Simon, 1956, 1990). For decisions to be flexible and adaptive — ecologically valid — the particular structure of information in the environment in which they are made must be considered. Thus, they are local and consider the change. They change whenever a new variable joins the set, whenever there is a change in the environment (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; Simon, 1956, 1990; Todd, 2001; Todd and Gigerenzer, 2000). So, in spite of the limitations of the human mind, people (decision-makers) develop an adaptive behaviour (being successful in their decisions) by exploring the information structure of natural decision environments (Gigerenzer and Selten, 2001). The interviews expressed this: *‘... in planning, the decision is never final. (...) It is on the ground that decisions are made, depending on who is commanding, (...) and there are different decisions for similar situations’* (Interview 1).

On the existing protocols of action, one of the interviewed police officers mentioned that *‘... perhaps at the level of decision-making and decision communication, methodology could be improved. But the principle that (...) there is certain openness and decisions are being made as things happen, (...) adapting to what is happening, I think that it happened, and it is a good protocol (...) I believe it is difficult to protocol scenarios, (...) in this type of political demonstrations. (...) if we did that, they would be protocols that would essentially push off individual accountability, because they would simply be actioned’* (Interview 1).

According to our research, there is a mix of logic and intuition (feeling), there is a mix of information and experience: *‘... there are no decisions either totally right or totally wrong (...). Sometimes the secret is more about knowing how to justify at the end why the decision was made, to have a good reason to have made the decision, even if the decision was not the best than to make a good decision that runs evil and then we cannot justify why we took it’* (Interview 1).

Prudent decision-making is a characteristic of adults, being the experience the key element to consider (Oliveira and Pais, 2010). Instead of resorting to slower and more costly analytical procedures, the experience of the learning process allows us to use simplified (often vague and imprecise) information representations that have been entered into a ‘knowledge store’ where there are positive or negative indicators (Rivers, Reyna and Mills, 2008) associated with mental images. It is, therefore, an affective repository of images (Slovic, Finucane, Peters and MacGregor, 2002, 2005) that is formed throughout our life through the experiences of individuals in certain situations or when they are confronted with certain stimuli (Oliveira and Pais, 2010). We have, then, ‘a more “intuitive” processing, made of essential summary representations, and more fluid’ (Oliveira and Pais, 2010, p. 454), based on experience, feelings and accumulated knowledge, that several times, or many times allows for more effective decisions, namely considering the level of expertise of the decision-maker. This allows us to respond quickly to situations where the decision-maker is immersed in a specific and complex environment, choosing the solution (or response) that seems sat-

isfactory enough — satisficing (Simon, 1990). The rationality of the decision is based on ‘the adaptive functionality that the decision-maker rehearses in making the decision based on the best/possible representation that the cognitive/affective function offers him/her of the physical and psychosocial structure of his environment’ (Oliveira and Pais, 2010, p. 423). Thus, we speak of an ecological rationality (Gigerenzer, 2001).

It seems this is precisely what happens on the field. If an adaptive behaviour and adaptive decision-making is to achieve, the commander’s experience plays a significant role, and this knowledge is shared with the other police officers (new at that specific service, or novices) on the terrain. The knowledge ‘... *is inside the commander’s head, or a person in charge, or a set of officers that were present in that operation... and the next time: “look, don’t forget the other went wrong in this or that, don’t forget to do this or that”*’ (Interview 1).

One may think this might be a good practice for the learning and training process of novice police officers, and it is. But it remains possible to do so because of the peaceful characteristic of the majority of the Portuguese political protest. Being the political demonstrations disruptive or violent, this strategy, though necessary, would not suffice to an adequate knowledge transfer. The interviewees also talked about this: ‘*It would be interesting (...) [to have] a platform that systematises some aspects of the operations (...) [because] one thing is looking at an archive like this and see thousands of paper sheets of previous Operation Reports, another thing is that information to be already analysed. (...) it would have to be something organised by topics, not a mere repository of reports, of scanned reports*’ (Interview 1).

Meanwhile, sometimes there is too much information circulating during the security operation, and if the information is not properly addressed, the inputs are above all misinformation and noise to the police commander. On the other hand, the management of emotions is, sometimes, difficult in these kinds of situations. As mentioned by a police officer, it would be positive ‘... *to have a place where people could stay, sometimes even a little bit away from all that emotion, where they could receive information, discuss it and make decisions*’ (Interview 1).

The study of decision-making in a world of uncertainty shows that ‘often, under some circumstances, a single good argument performs better, not only because it is simpler and faster, but because it is more precise and predictive than a multiplicity of mathematical equations’ (Ratinho, 2015, p. 15). The use of cognitive shortcuts allows this. Sometimes the decision-maker ignores much of the available information to focus on a single good reason to make the decision — one-reason decision-making (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999) — which allows him to avoid the lengthy process of analysing various clues of information, being able to be highly effective in its decision. According to our research one of the police officers stressed that ‘... *normally under these circumstances the Police Commander who is responsible for the whole operation would go to the field with his staff, (...) the commander listened to several people and discussed, he was a person already with a lot of experience at that time in these matters, but he still listened to many people and then made decisions*’ (Interview 1).

Conclusions

Police are the cornerstone of public order and security/safety of demonstrations and meetings. Police are crucial to protect fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens during manifestations and public gatherings.

Having the event a fragmented organisation there was no formal representative to deal with to make the usual planning meetings. The information was being delivered through diverse sources, different organisers, thus posing a problem to the police. The collected information was fuzzy, giving no warranty of reliability and accuracy. This is becoming an increasing problem the police have to cope with. Nevertheless, the increasing autonomy citizens have in searching, analysing, and producing information, using new technological devices and channels pose a new problem to the police. Of course 'technology per se does not produce cultural and political change, although it does always have powerful effects of an indeterminate kind. Yet, the possibilities created by the new multimodal, interactive communication system extraordinarily reinforce the chances for new messages and new messengers to populate the communication networks of society at large' (Castells, 2009: 414).

On the other hand, in these situations, there is no leadership, and this may turn into a difficulty for the organisers themselves to act together with the demonstrators they don't know, to organise them or to contain some disruptive or violent behaviours. Considering this particular kind of citizenship, self-mobilisation for civic participation, and genuine interest in building up a fair society, one may say this event was the Portuguese democracy pinnacle.

Nevertheless, Portuguese police need to improve its protocols according to the different scenarios. Also, police need to improve command and control during these events. Training in mediation and negotiation to all police organisation should be extended as well as training in analytic research in social networks. Furthermore, both media monitoring and media training have to be considered of crucial importance for the police, as 'different forms of control and manipulation of messages and communication in the public space are at the heart of power-making' (Castells, 2009: 302).

Lessons learned and recommendations:

- Mediation, negotiation and dialogue, intelligence, public order, coordination, and co-operation are fundamental;
- Understand social networks and protest repertoire;
- Identification of threats, vulnerabilities, and risks;
- Definition of policing strategy: low profile and high visibility of police resources, high profile when and where it is relevant;
- Differentiation and facilitation based on behaviours;

- Improve public communication strategy;
- Monitor social media permanently;
- Improve police training and education;
- Make research during real time events.

A permanent work of adaptation — chameleon style of policing — to the new social environment is part of the police strategy. Ensuring the balance between freedom and security in the complex world we live in is even more difficult, given the multidimensional nature of socio-political phenomena and the permanent scrutiny of public authorities.

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