

Anna BARWIŃSKA-MALAJOVICZ¹

GENERATION X – GENERATION OF LOST POTENTIAL OR OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES? THE POLISH CASE

The article presents the main research focus on Generation X in Poland, on the problem of this generation's (un)adjustment and (non)capitalization of the potential and circumstances related to the collapse of socialism and the onset of the country's system transformation process. In countries such as Poland this problem becomes of particular significance because the life of Generation X became integrally interwoven with the radical political, social and economic changes. The primary objective of this paper is to present selected conditions of a start of the working lives of the Polish Generation X and the significance thereof for a successful entry into the adult life by this generation. An attempted analysis covered homogeneity vs. diversity of behaviors typical of this generation. The paper comprised studying the subject literature, the desk research method, descriptive statistics method and the collective case study method. Reference was made to the reports and data bases collected by Eurostat and by Poland and the USA, including by the bureaus for statistics in both countries.

Keywords: Generation X, labor market, system transformation, Poland.

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper includes an attempt to capture the traits of the generations born in the 20th century, while the main focus was on Generation X, which was growing up and entering the labor market in Poland. During the studies on Generation X, its behaviors, features and attitudes, research attention is due to the issue of (un)adjustment of this generation and (non)capitalization of the potential offered by the labor market at the moment of a start of their professional life. This problem becomes particularly prominent in countries such as Poland where the beginning of professional life of Generation X became integrally interwoven with radical political, social and economic changes.

The main objective of this paper is to present selected conditions of a start of a professional life by Generation X in Poland and the significance thereof for this generation's successful entry into adulthood. An attempted analysis covered homogeneity vs. diversity of behaviors typical to this generation in terms of the oldest and the youngest representatives.

¹ Anna Barwińska-Małajowicz, DSc, PhD, Associate Prof., University of Rzeszów, Institute of Economics and Finance, ul. Ćwiklińskiej 2, 35-601 Rzeszów, Poland; e-mail: abarwinska@ur.edu.pl. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0228-1761.

The analyzed period partially converges with the years in which Generation X members were born and covers the period from the mid 1960s but stretches slightly beyond the years of birth of this generation, *i.e.*, until the 1990s, because it is then when the last age groups of Generation X entered adulthood.

The objective was achieved with the application of the subject literature studies, the desk research method, descriptive statistics method and the collective case study method. Reference was made to the reports and data bases collected by Eurostat and by Poland and the USA, including by the national bureaus for statistics in both countries.

2. GENERATIONS IN POLAND

The time frame, when the representatives of individual generations were born should be perceived as mobile, depending on the country, where a generation lives and functions. The age boundaries are stipulated and often blurred. The birth years for individual generations indicated in the Polish subject literature (Barwińska-Małajowicz, 2011; Mamak-Zdanecka, Maksymowicz, 2015; Juchnowicz, 2009; Miś, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2018; Zagórska, 2012), are compiled in table 1.

Table 1. Generations in Poland

NAME OF GENERATION	BIRTH YEARS	AGE IN 2020
THE SILENT GENERATION	BEFORE 1946	75+
BABY BOOMERS	1946–1964	56–74
GENERATION X	1965–1980	40–55
GENERATION Y	1981–1989	31–39
GENERATION Z	1990–2000	20–30

Source: (own study based on rynekpracy.pl, Manpower; Barwińska-Małajowicz, 2011; Kozłowski, 2012; Maksymowicz, Mamak-Zdanecka, 2014; Wiktorowicz, 2018).

An analysis of the data (Table 1.) demonstrates certain differences in the birth years of individual generations indicated by the subject literature written in the Polish and English language. Individual time deviations regard intervals of several years. For the purposes of this paper years 1965–1980 were considered the birth period of Generation X.

It is also worth mentioning that the youngest generation that will be entering the labor market in about 10 years is the Alpha generation, with the greatest material and technological potential and which includes people born after 2010.

3. GENERATION X IN POLAND – DISCOURSE ON THE INTERNAL DIVERSITY, LOST POTENTIAL AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

An analysis of the attitudes, behavior and motivations driving Generation X in Poland followed a synthetic review of statistical data on the share of Generation X in the American, European and Polish society (Table 2.).

As the analysis of the data compiled in table 2 shows, in 2019 Generation X constituted a large group of people, regardless of the country considered – the USA, European Union or Poland. Its share in population in general constitutes in every country mentioned about 1/5 of the entire national population. Whereas its share in the labor market resources is

significantly higher. The entire Generation X functions on the present labor market with the highest numbers of those born in the late 1970s, in particular, those who entered the labor market at the end of 1990s. Representatives of this generation will start leaving the labor market from about 2025 and the most numerous birth years only in about 20 years.

Table 2. Share of Generation X in the societies of the USA, EU-28 and Poland (2019)

LOCATION	GEN X (PEOPLE)	SHARE OF GENERATION X IN PROFESSIONALLY ACTIVE POPULATION IN GENERAL/WORKING-AGE POPULATION IN GENERAL*	SHARE OF GENERATION X IN POPULATION IN GENERAL*
USA	60 720 000	37% (37.13%) ^A	18.5% (18.45%)
EU-28	109 214 585	44% / 48%	21% (21.26%)
POLAND	7 621 734	45% / 47%	20% (20.07%)

* own calculations.

^A in professionally active people in general.

Source: (own study based on the Eurostat database; *OECD Labour Force Statistics 2020*, Paryż: OECD Publishing, 2020, DOI: 10.1787/5842cc7f-en (accessed 6 February 2021); Worldometer; Statista; *Rocznik Statystyki Międzynarodowej*, 2020, Warszawa: GUS).

Although this could be considered as the proverbial ‘reinventing the wheel’, yet, in the context of the discussed subject, it is worthwhile to comprehend where the symbol X comes from in the name of this generation. The letter X is most often associated with some kind of unknown. Is this the case in this instance? A search for an answer to this question may be facilitated by examining the political, social and economic conditions in which this generation went through adolescence and entered the labor market. Their reality differed depending on their geopolitical location. Polish Generation X featured uncertainty of the future. The older group of this generation grew up at the time of socialism, the younger group at the time of socialism collapse and the onset of the market transformation process and effectively the image of socialism known to the oldest and the youngest representatives differs. The members of Generation X observed the time of the system change. They did not know where they should head, on the one hand they were lost in chaos, on the other hand they were created by the model trend. They faced the challenge of a great unknown, which was to be brought about by the domestic and global system changes as well as the economy developing in accordance with new cannons. A focus on Poland may lead to a conclusion that marking the generation with the letter X, as outlined above, stems from an immense, to the extent of a pathology, uncertainty and a plethora of unknowns they were confronted with. This is the reason why the generation is referred to by the short, but very suggestive symbol X. Also in an international context, the name of this generation is associated with an unknown in a mathematical equation. A distinguishing feature attributed to this group is an overwhelming confusion, anxiety and a lack of sense, which to some extent corresponded to career building and working to achieve some economic success (Ryś, [http](http://)). Generation X entered their work life accompanied by the circumstances and conditions which outlined for them an extraordinarily difficult or even hardly solvable equation. At this point it is hard not to pose a question whether it is a generation of

oppositionists negating consumerism, lost in the chaos of the events happening at their time, not knowing their direction, negating hierarchy and the truths provided by the media and the elderly did not pose for itself any complicated “mathematical equations” which they often found hardly manageable.

Notably, the Polish Generation X is highly diversified within itself. The birth years of the members of this generation span over about 15 years and the conditions of the adolescence of the oldest and the youngest member are drastically different. Generation X covers people who lived and remember well the time of the Polish People’s Republic and who entered the labor market in mid 1980s, which was the last decade of socialism, as well as those people who at the end of socialism were in kindergarten or elementary school and their professional life started at the beginning of 21st century (Figure 1.). The Generation X members were shaped by the factors, stimuli and driving forces which took on different forms before and after 1989. Their behavior, attitudes and values were affected by the events of a radical changes nature (system change, economy system, system of education, organization and functioning of the labor market etc.).

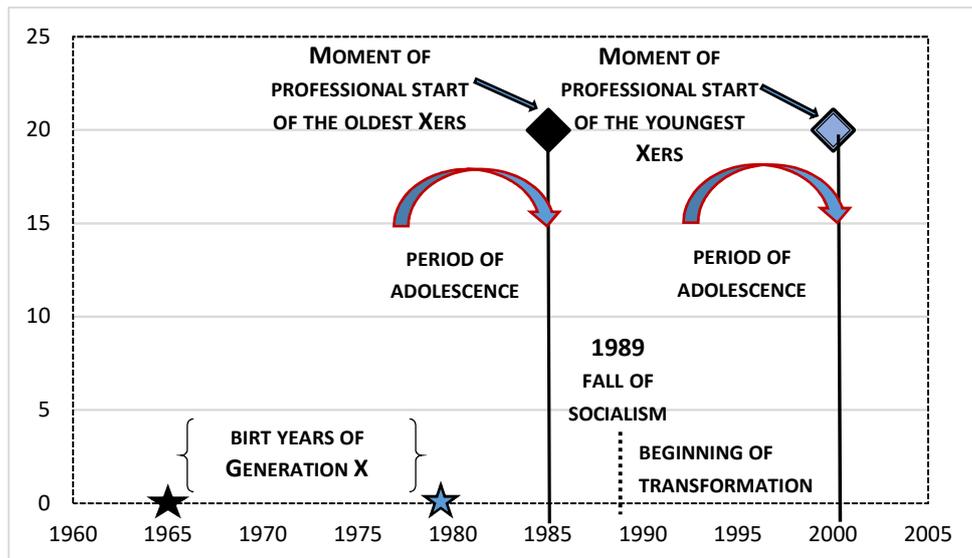


Figure 1. Generation X in Poland – from birth until entry onto the labor market

Source: Own study.

It is important to consider the different conditions of adolescence of the oldest and the youngest Xers in Poland. While the former grew up during the socialist period of the 1970s and 1980s, the latter acquired their first teenage experiences after the fall of socialism, in the conditions of an emerging market economy. Consequently, their experiences and opportunities are very different. The first group lived their youth in the reality typical of the so-called democratic people’s states enclosed within the socialist bloc, while the second group already saw the borders of the Western countries open, they could grow up drawing on various models and influences of the international environment. While the former could mainly choose Russian as a foreign language, for the latter English was commonly available

throughout their education. The first group was less open to changes, the second group were automatically immersed in the vortex of a range of intense transformations: political, economic, social, cultural, technological etc.

The older members entered adulthood, including the labor market, in the middle of 1980s and since they were brought up in the system of formal socialism their struggle to fit in an entirely new political, social and economic reality of the turn of 1980s and 1990s was “a hard nut to crack”. The content related to society, country and the world they had acquired throughout their entire cycle of education suddenly proved to be invalid (Fazlagić, 2008).

Generation X, sometimes defined as the End of the Century Generation, features such strong internal disparity, that some experts on the subject distinguish within it three generations, *i.e.*, Generation '89 (born in 1964–1970)², Children of the Transformation (birth years 1971–1976) and the End of Century Stragglers (those born in 1977–1982) (Wrzesień, 2007). The names of all of the three generations are related to the historical changes in Poland.

In the context of those considerations, it is worth taking a closer look at the accounts of the oldest Xers³, reminiscing on a period when the socialist regime collapsed and, for countries such as Poland, aside opening up the borders of other countries, also unknown challenges and new living conditions appeared. Presented below experiences constitute a biographic memory, micro perspective, where the respondents portray specific daily life, social and economic reality, as perceived by an individual, not within the context of commonly known macro events of a political, economic or social nature.

1. *It was 1989, when I visited the Benelux countries for the first time. Actually, it was the first time I crossed the iron curtain. Until that moment all we could see outside Poland were other socialist countries such as Czechoslovakia or German Democratic Republic. We crossed the border of West Germany at night, most of the people on the coach were asleep. At dawn when we left the highway and drove towards a town we were “glued” to the windows. What a different world it was! Colorful world! Vibrant colors, neon signs, advertising, etc. A fairy-tale world. I had not known such world. Our world was so grey.*
2. *When the German-German monetary union was signed we went with our friend from East Germany to West Berlin. Our friend was incredibly excited because he was about to see the western part of Berlin for the first time. So did we. When we came out from the S-Bahn we were surprised with the colorful crowd of people flowing down the sidewalk. There were sandwich boards in front of cafes inviting you for a cup of coffee (at the price of a bag of coffee in Poland). It felt as if someone played an exciting multicolor film on the screen and we were in it.*
3. *I graduated from a rather good university, I returned to my town and managed to get a job at a school. I started teaching, although I had not studied teaching. I completed a suitable course a few years later. I was happy to have a job. A job that was rather stable. Back then, my friends, those who started working just after graduating from high school, did not have any employment problems. It was back in*

² Opinions within this scope vary, for example, according to B.W. Mach there is no Polish transformation of 89/90 generation (*Pokolenie transformacji '89?*, http).

³ All relations mentioned in the paper are original and come from the author's own collective case study. The author represents the oldest birth years of Generation X in Poland.

1980s. But in the early 1990s, along with the growing unemployment and the progressing privatization of companies, many of them lost their jobs, many faced the grey market. I hung on to my school, because I craved a bit of certainty and stability at the new time, which was so different from the time of my growing up and with which I found so familiar. And I saw some of my friends suddenly start setting up their businesses and become affluent immediately. They were able to grasp the opening up opportunities, resourceful and with an entrepreneurial spirit and brave people or wheeler dealers and sly? Anyway, with a nouveau riche show-off.

4. *Where those difficult times? Yes. Very difficult. It was 1992. We had just got married and had a baby. Both of us were university graduates. We worked but our salaries were miniscule. Our friend from the former GDR, who had set up a large company, offered us to be his representatives for Poland. We were thrilled! It was supposed to be the beginning of a new life. But it turned out that ... we could not afford it. I could not live facing the choice: buy some better juice for my son or pay phone bills for talking to a German contractor. I chose the juice. We could not afford to take up the opportunities available in the early 1990s or maybe our education was too one-dimensional and we still were too impregnated with the socialist drill....*

Whereas a different representative of the generation presents the following recollections on the reality of childhood and adolescence of the oldest Xers:

5. *In my childhood oranges were a delicacy. Cuban. Parents queued up for ages, available only once a year – for Christmas. It was the scent of Christmas. Bananas? Kiwis? We knew them from some films. But the unforgettable tastes are the Bambino ice-cream, bubble gum, orange soda powder, chocolate-like products and pez-like sweets in a round container. And... butter sold by weight. And queues, queue committees and the joy and pride when you were on your way home with a toile tissue “necklace”.*

The oldest members of Generation X lived their childhood and adolescence in the Polish People’s Republic in the 1960s and 1970s. Understanding the differences between the oldest and the youngest Xers requires situating them in the socioeconomic and political conditions of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, in the changes taking place at that time. It should be emphasized that in terms of the social and economic life the communist time in Poland was not homogenous. Poland of 1960s was entirely different from Poland of 1980s, yet, it was continuously the Polish People’s Republic. The quoted opinions should be perceived in reference to the economic and social conditions, living and working conditions, consumption, development and educational opportunities at that time. The 1970s, during which the educational, professional and awareness-raising personality of the oldest group of Generation X was shaped, was the so-called Gierek decade, while 1980s, when those people entered the labor market, on the one hand was “the period of economic deprivation (mainly due to inflation) and a drastic inability to satisfy the consumer needs” (Zalewska, Cobel-Tokarska, 2014), the time of crisis associated with a permanent absence of goods on the shop-shelves and long queues. On the other hand, it was the time (late 1980s) the economic foundations of the system wobbled and finally the system collapse.

The conditions of 1980s, when the oldest group of Xers entered adulthood and started their working life included closed national borders, lack of easy access to learning English in formal education (with the Russian language favored), growing up under a certain strict submissiveness, in the reality of insufficiency and a reality of queuing “for everything”. This group of Xers was already tired and wary at the beginning of their adult life and the

time of the 1990s transformation proved to be very difficult for many of them, which is evidenced in some of the above statements. They started their working life not only in the face of radical economic and social changes, but also a gigantic technological acceleration. They had to adjust to the new reality and prove their own value. Those determinants have led to the emergence of the possibility of perceiving these people as a somehow lost group, in particular with respect to those living in the countryside, in small towns, in villages, deprived of access to, for example, English language learning. These are people whose potential has often not been fully used. There exists the term: the breakthrough generation, which includes people born in Poland between 1965 and 1975. This generation is not recognized by foreign experts on the subject. It is the oldest group of Generation X (in the author's opinion the birth years of this group should be narrowed down to 1965–1970), who typically feature: "Analogous childhood and digital adulthood. Teletext in the youth and Facebook in adulthood. The group of a demographic slump, partly children of parents who lived through war. The last generation entering adulthood during socialism" (Korycki, <http>).

By contrast, childhood of the youngest representatives of Generation X falls at the time of socialism, precisely the last decade, but their youth, the period of their adolescence was intertwined with the time of system reforms in Poland. Teenagers' adolescence at the occurred in parallel with the country "growing-up" to the market economy, democracy built following the 1989 breakthrough (Cobel-Tokarska, 2015). They entered adulthood at the turn of 20th and 21st century, thus the time when the initial thorough socioeconomic reforms had already been introduced. Selected accounts of the youngest Xers describing how they entered adulthood are presented below.

1. *I had just returned from the States. My uncle stayed there. I am a bit sorry for him. He is 13 years my senior. He went to the USA in the middle of 1980s. He wanted to patch up his family budget. He was a university graduate in Poland, but he did not know any English, well now he is quite communicative, but when he got to the USA he did not know English, so he did not find a job to suit his education, he was a laborer, therefore he did not have much time to learn the language. He was simply too tired after work. He had lost several years... I had a rather good job, my good English helped me to find one. Why did I come back? I am looking for something new.*
2. *I remember the socialist Poland as the country of my childhood, now quite remote, I associate it with a warm family home and which passed along with my childhood. Now I live in Ireland. I left Poland just after graduating from my university. Thanks to my good command of English my assimilation here was not difficult. I work in accordance with my profession. I am very satisfied. Do I plan to return do Poland? No. Definitely not for good. Just to pay visits.*
3. *My kindergarten and elementary school time fell at 1980s, the end of socialism. My adolescence fell at the transformation period. The 1990s was a very eclectic period, some kind of a political, economic and social mishmash. We were opening up to the Western trends, but we still carried the burden of the past. But the West was getting closer and we, the children brought up in the Polish People's Republic saw opportunities in it. The national borders ceased to be the limits. Like many of my peers I decided to learn a foreign language. I hoped that a good command of a language would help me find a job outside of Poland. I left the country shortly after graduating from my university, I found a job in accordance with my profession*

and I fitted in the new environment. I am very satisfied and I am not planning to return to Poland for good.

4. *In 1994, when I was in my high school fourth grade, I had to decide on my university major. My friends persuaded me to apply at a newly opened University. It was a private facility which had only been opened for 3 years. We were absolutely clueless as to what to expect... We were totally shocked by what we saw there. The campus – as we knew from movies only, the first in Poland and the biggest in this part of Europe electronic library with newspapers and magazines from all over the world, with archives going back to the WWII, native speakers “forcing” us to learn English 25 hours a week, American lecturers, etc. We heard the terms MBA, Black Belt Six Sigma, CRM, etc. for the first time. Once we were proficient in English, it was time to take up German, then French. And, naturally, more and more economics, marketing, banking, HR and IT. Poland educated their future management human resources. Was my 1994 decision worth it? My first job after graduating from my university was at one of the biggest national banks. Warsaw headquarters. Back then an average Polish salary was just under PLN 2000 gross. Whereas, they offered me, for a trial period, 3000 net with a promise of a pay rise after a month.*

The collapse of communism opened up before the youngest Xers, who are at least a decade younger than the oldest ones, an entirely new reality, with new and certainly broader opportunities and more favorable development conditions. Those birth years were growing up in new economy conditions of and new functioning of the Polish society, assimilated and absorbed the changes in a somewhat automatic way. They learnt the changes by successive studying at school. And they entered the labor market prepared, not affected by the mechanisms of socialist thinking. They entered adulthood and the labor market about one a half decade later than the older friends of their generation. And it was the decade of radical political, economic and social changes such as the already mentioned opening of national borders and the possibility of drawing inspiration from other countries, increased access to new forms and ways of education, new content in curricula, abundance and diversity of goods and services, an increase in people's awareness of themselves, liberation of Poles' entrepreneurial resources, availability of expressing one's own opinion, one's own judgements and views, prospects to freely choose one's own development path, rapid development of the Internet, but also uncertainty, conflict and difficulties in adapting to freedom (Segiet, 2015). The oldest Xers had to learn the new rules of the game, the youngest grew up learning them automatically with a simultaneous support from school and their environment.

One more significant determinant from the period of transformation must be mentioned – departing from a welfare state, which caused social inequality to increase (Szymanowska, 2017) and consequently resulted in a disturbing effect of high cost of the changes making it more difficult for poorer social classes to make a career start. It should be noted at this stage that an analysis of findings of a research conducted in Poland by the Centre for Public Opinion Research showed that “a significant part of the society (52%) believe that the system transformation and its effects did not affect their and their families' lives” (*Czy warto było zmieniać ustrój?*, 2013). Such opinion is rather unexpected, considering the momentum and multidirectional nature of the changes in the transformation period (of a political, economic and social character), which – as the referred to research findings suggest – would bear no impact on the lives of over a half of Polish society.

One more (rather narrow) group may be distinguished within Generation X, *i.e.* people born “in the middle” – around 1971. Their initial steps into adulthood fell at the years of the system transformation. According to B.W. Mach: “Entering adulthood at the moment of a new system being shaped could definitely be considered an extraordinary experience” (*Pokolenie transformacji '89?* http). In the face of the transformational changes, this group was confronted with “(...) a strong polarization. The more individualistic ones, equipped with skills necessary in these conditions, were convinced that the world stood open before them and they could achieve anything. Yet, those who believed that very little could be achieved prevailed” (*Pokolenie transformacji '89?*, http). On the grounds of the quoted statement, another question can be posed: whether it is not the “middle” Xers who should be considered the lost generation. After the collapse of socialism “a mood of pessimism and dissatisfaction with the effects of the reforms undertaken prevailed in the society” (Sasińska-Klas, 2005). Such mood was also shared by the young who did not perceive the transformation as a source of an opportunity but rather of a feeling of alienation and a lack of impact on their future and that of their country (Szymanowska, 2017). Obviously, this attitude may not be overgeneralized as typical of all adolescents at that time. Some young people were able to adjust very quickly, detect the new trends and use the changes effectively for their personal development and their career path.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the subject literature offers also one more term regarding the youngest birth years of Generation X, or more precisely the birth years on the border of Generation X and Y (those born on the turn of 1970s and 1980s and at the beginning of 1980s). They are often regarded as a link between Generation X and Y and they are called a hidden generation or Xennials. Xennials’ recollection of socialism is rather poor but they remember their analogue childhood and digital adolescence very well. They perfectly understand and function in the digital reality but they understand and respect tradition. Those several birth years feature something specific, something distinguishing them from Xers and from Millennials, hence they are an interesting subject for further research attention.

4. CONCLUSION

Prior to the economic transformation process people were forced to be consistent in their actions, to live within one color, which was also typical for the oldest members of Generation X who entered the labor market in 1980s. The oldest representatives of Generation X, limited by socialism, with shortcomings difficult to overcome, entered an entirely new reality of the transformation, their “mental resources” originated from a different time and often lost their relevance rapidly. Presently, although many of them hold managerial positions, are in management of many enterprises or banks and even are the Polish political class, yet, there are large groups of people whose potential was not fully explored because they lacked relevant means, capacity, stimulation, despite vast reserves of aptitude and aspirations.

The middle group of Xers thought that the reality lacked structure to such an extent that they would manage. There was a belief that there were opening up or forming new social positions. However, a majority presumed that regardless of their efforts they will not manage due to the nature of the existing structures.

Most opportunities opened up before the youngest Xers and a good few radical changes had already been completed prior to their entry onto the labor market. It is this part of the

generation which could not only learn by observing the ongoing changes but also had an opportunity, at the stage of formal education, to learn the essence and mechanisms of the changes in progress. To them Poland gained a multitude of shades during their adolescence, in contrast to the oldest Xers who were stuck to the windows when entering any country in the Western Europe for the first time (on the turn of 1980s and 1990s) and often the only boundaries preventing them from being successful were solely the boundaries within their minds and mind-sets.

Finally, it should be noted that due to the complexity of the studied subject matter and also a limited volume of the article, only some subject aspects have been outlined in the above considerations. In order to continue the discourse further research threads and extended substantive analysis need to be introduced, thus continuing work in the form of another paper as a contribution to the discussion on the addressed issues.

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