

The Impact Analysis of the European Funds in Romanian Agriculture- Economic Approach

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ABSTRACT: *The article is focused on the balance absorption of the European funds from Romanian agriculture presenting an economic approach after the accession of our country to the structures of the European Union as of 1st of January 2007. The whole technical analysis under our attention can be segmented into two major intervals: the period 2007–2013 and the segment 2014–2020. The article describes the cleavage, the major difference between the two periods and it contains important economical details about the development of agriculture in Romania which has a major impact in the Romanian economy. The analysis will emphasize in a comparative manner the similarities and the differences found inside the country and in the other countries from the European Union. Official statistical dates and relevant economical sources were consulted in order to highlight the funding priorities of the cohesion policy of European Union based on the achievement of those indicators established by the Lisbon Strategy for the 2007-2013 programming period and by the Europe 2020 Strategy for 2014-2020, which outline the efforts of our country to benefit from all these unique opportunities for a integrated economies.*

KEY WORD: *European Funds, Romanian Economy, Agriculture, Absorption Balance, Economic Convergence*

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I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding the internal situation, the agriculture represents one of the important sectors of the Romanian economy. Our country covers an area of 238 000 km², of which 87.1% is rural and from this point of view the rural development represents further an essential national issue because of the relevance of countryside areas. After structure indicators, from the total population of 19.5 million inhabitants - 45% lives in rural areas after National Statistical Institute. Of the total area agricultural land covers 57% and forest land 30%. The share of agriculture in the Romanian economy (at 6.6% of Gross Value Added) still remains one of the highest in the EU (more than three times the EU average of 1.7% of GVA). Romania is located on the 6th of Europe as an agricultural area used, after France, Spain, Germany, Britain and Poland and on the 5th place as arable land after France, Spain, Germany and Poland.

Approximately one third of all farms in the EU are found in Romania, with some 3.9 million farm holdings. Increasing competitiveness of the sector and accompanying the restructuring process are key challenges. Farming structures are highly polarized-large and medium sized farms, account for around 7% of holdings, but manage some 70% of agricultural area, and have a clear competitive potential.

The evolution of the Romanian economy has been and still is strongly influenced by the external transformations which came with the accession of our country to the structures of the European Union as of 1st of January 2007. From the same year, as a member state of the European Union, through the Structural Funds, Romania received non-reimbursable financial assistance from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the Cohesion Fund (CF), and the European Fisheries Fund (EFF). Financial allocation meant around EUR 33.5 billion in total (out of which approximately EUR 19.2 billion came under the Convergence objective, EUR 8.3 billion were for agricultural and fisheries funds, and EUR 455 million came under the European Territorial Cooperation objective).

The National Development Plan for the years 2007–2013 focused Romania's socio-economic development in line with the European Union's Cohesion Policy, with the main objective of reducing the disparities between our country and the EU Member States in the shortest time possible. For the same period, six national development priorities were set, among which we mention the increase of economic competitiveness and the development of the knowledge-based economy; the development of the rural economy and increasing productivity in the agricultural sector, implicitly diminishing the development disparities between the regions of the country. Among these priority points, the overall strategic goal of the rural economy development was to develop a competitive agriculture based on knowledge and private initiative, as well as to protect the cultural and historical heritage of rural areas in Romania.

Among these structural instruments, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development aims at achieving the objectives of increasing agricultural and forestry competitiveness, of agricultural and environmental management, of improving the quality of life and diversifying economic activities in areas ranging from rural areas with low population density to peri-urban rural areas in decline under the pressure of urban centers.

In order to achieve this objective, measures have been taken to adjust the supply to market requirements, where financial support has been given to farm modernization and the improvement of human capital in agriculture (advisory and support measures for young farmers, measures to encourage the association of producers), as well as improving the quality of products. Also, the sustainable economic development of farms and forestry holdings aimed at implementing actions that focused on the sustainable use of the agricultural and forestry land, which materialized in agri-environment and animal welfare payments, compensatory payments for lands with natural handicap, afforestation premiums, but also in carrying out actions to prevent natural calamities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last decades, the problematic perspective regarding the analysis of the impact of the European funds on the economic development in the member states of European Union became an important research topic, widely investigated and adapted to present circumstances both in the Romanian and European scientific communities with interesting and conclusive results according to the statements of the specialists in the field. In this respect, given the space allocated for this section of the article, from the Romanian reference literature we mention the articles signed by:

Păun (2014, 2015) which used explanatory variable as the absorptio ratio measured as total annual payments made for European projects contracted by different private and public operators from the countries from Eastern Europe. In his opinion, the concluding remarks are that the limited impact of European funds, especially on social development and competitiveness could be explained from the perspective of least two reasons: European funds are obtained from taxes applied to European citizens and business sector and have a very important redistributive role and many projects financed by such public funds are not truly investments producing real profits-returns after the implementation or construction phase.

Cocoşatu (2015) realised a systematic approach on the implementation of European grants in Romania, concluding that rata de absorţie a proiectelor din România nu poate ajunge la nivelul tarilor dezvoltate din Uniunea Europeană din cauza dificultăţilor în implementarea programelor operationale datorate în parte şi legislaţiei în vigoare foarte birocratică, capacităţii administrative slabe a anumitor institutii specializate, lipsa fondurilor de implementare a proiectelor atât din partea autorităţilor de proiecte dar şi managementul de proiect şi financiar neperformant, suprapunerea celor două perioade de programare etc.

Also, theoretical approaches and applied representative studies from local literature are signed by Tudor (2015); Kuciel (2016); Borza et al. (2015), Marin (2019), Moga, Antohi et al.(2012); Goşa et al. and others.

From international economic literature, Dumciuviene et al (2015) had analysed the relation between structural fund and economic indicators of the European Union, inventorying the scientific approaches signed by Ederveen and others from 2006, which declared that, on average, structural funds are ineffective, but for the countries with a well-organized or proper institutional framework, the structural funds are effective. Mohl and Hagen (2010) focused on the use of the EU funds for regional development, stated that the EU structural funds often finance the projects that aren't economically efficient because they have been affected by the political motives. Moreno-Enguix et al., 2012 considered that through the regional policies, the regions can increase their competitiveness and development as a priority objective financed by structural funds. In this context, they considered that determining the efficiency of European regional policies is an issue of high importance and they calculated technical efficiency and inefficiency of the structural fund applied in the priority 1 regions for the period 2000-2006.

Rodríguez-Pose and Fratesi (2003) used panel regression to test the impact of European funds on economic development and found an insignificant impact on infrastructure and business support, a short term positive effect in case of agriculture and a medium term positive impact for education and human resource development sector.

Varga and Vel (2010) used a New Keynesian general equilibrium model and they observed that “in the short run these inventions boost spending and raise output and they also raise inflationary pressures and could lead to real appreciations and crowd out productive private investment”. Dall’Erba, Guillain and le Gallo (2009) used a neo-classical economic growth model and concluded that “the impact of the total funds (costs) is always significant, but always negative and very small”.

Aiello & Pipo (2012) discussed the role of European Union cohesion policy in Italy, they considered that the structural funds have had a greater impact in the South compared to the Centre-North of the country, but they haven't contributed to reduce the productivity differences in Italy.

In the light of the consulted bibliography, we conclude that the contracting of EU structural funds depends of the ways and manners to solve the issues related to exceeding the dislocation of regional disparities, a better cooperation with the state institutions involved in order to increase the capacity to get the highest benefits from such opportunities.

Research Objectives

The main objective of the article is to present the position of the Romania from the perspective of the balance of absorption through the Structural Funds, presenting in a comparative manner the similarities and the differences found inside the country and in the other countries from the European Union.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

From the methodological perspective, important research centres and specialists in the field/authors had studies a specific macroeconomic model HERMIN. This model was one of the most used attempts of econometric simulation of European funds impact on the economic processes, including the adaptation of this model for specific country cases including Romania, Ireland, Poland, Hungary according to Zaman et al (2014) and Popescu et al (2016). After Romanian Centre for Economic Policies (2003), HERMIN model is a multi-sector growth model, in which the structural funds are assimilated to agriculture and market services investments, estimating their impact on some macroeconomic variables such as: Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment, productivity, external trade etc. Also, the cost-benefit analysis became an often used instrument and prerequisite for some operational programs. According to Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, impact evolution is searching to identify all those changes and those results which can be directly assigned to a program, a project or a policy based on two methodologies: counterfactual evaluation and theory-based evaluation. The established methodology of research helps to consult the data for absorption balance which were provided by KPMG annual reports on Eastern Europe (Romania) and also important data provided by EUROSTAT-European statistics on regions and cities.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the light of the official data published by the European Commission, in financial terms, the structural instruments for the period 2007–2013 amounted to € 347 410 billion, which accounted for 35.7% of the total European budget. The annual absorption of the € 3-4 billion from the structural funds generated the economic growth of our country and the opening of new valuable opportunities that will lead also to the development of the Romanian agriculture.

Table 1: Absorption of structural funds-comparison between Romania and other EU Member states between 2007-2013

	Total allocations □ Billion	Payments March 2012, □ Billion	Absorption rate (percentage)	Total allocations - capita □	Total payments - Capita □
Estonia	3.4	1.6	46.8	2540	1190
Latvia	4.5	1.7	36.4	2032	740
Poland	67.2	26.4	39.0	1759	690
Czech R.	26.5	7.0	26.5	2520	667
Bulgaria	6.7	1.6	24.0	889	209
Romania	19.2	3.3	17.3	897	155
Hungary	24.9	8.8	35.3	2496	881
Lithuania	6.8	3.3	48.0	2088	1002
Slovenia	4.1	1.6	38.3	2000	767
Slovakia	11.5	3.2	27.8	2116	587

Source:Costache, 2012, p. 33

Taking into account the data from Table 1, from the fourth column which consists of the percentages of absorption of the European funds from the other countries that have joined the European Union since 2004, unfortunately, one can notice that Romania ranked last of the 28 European states. By the end of February 2017, Romania had achieved an effective absorption rate of 2007-2013 Structural and Cohesion Funds (“SCF”) of 79.23%, with interim reimbursements from the European Commission (without advance payments) of EUR 14.88 billion. In a country-by-country comparison, Romania ranked last but one among EU Member States in terms of EU funds absorption.

For the same period, compared to the other EU Member States, the official statistical data shows the highest average absorption rate in the countries listed above for Lithuania (48.0 %) and Estonia (46.8 %). A remarkable progress in the absorption of funds is also observed in the case of Poland 39.0 %; Hungary 35.3 %; Bulgaria 24.0% and Slovakia 27.8%.

At the beginning of 2016, the European Commission had approved all financing programs through which Romania will receive EU Funds corresponding to the 2014-2020 programming period. During the current programming period (2014-2020), Romania will receive an indicative total allocation of approximately EUR 32.96 billion from Structural and Cohesion Funds, Rural Development and Fisheries funds, Cross-border cooperation programs and the Connecting Europe Facility. Out of this, EUR 22.99 billion will be allocated to the operational programs financed under the Cohesion Policy and EUR 8.13 billion will relate to the National Program for Rural Development.

These agriculture funds are available to support the Common Agricultural Policy, as follows: The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), contributing to structural reform of agriculture and development of rural areas. This Fund acts locally through the National Programme for Rural Development; and The Operational Programme for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs (OP FMA), funded by the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, supporting structural measures in this field and “accompanying measures” of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). At the end of 2016, the absorption rate under National Programme for Rural Development had increased to 10%, with EUR 767 million absorbed and effective reimbursements of about EUR 480 million.

As stated in the European Commission’s press release from the 26th of May 2015, 24 additional rural development programs were adopted to stimulate the agricultural sector and the European rural area. They aimed at improving the competitiveness of EU agriculture, protecting the rural environment and the climate, and also strengthening the economic and social structures of rural communities in the period up to 2020.

It is estimated that the programs adopted in Brussels will create over 40 000 jobs in rural areas and about 700 000 training places to encourage innovation, knowledge transfer, more sustainable agricultural practices and stronger rural businesses. € 27 billion funding is available from the EU budget, co-funded by the other public national/regional funds and/or private funds.

The modernization of agricultural holdings, the support granted to young farmers, the sustainable land management and the improvement of broadband infrastructure are among the priority actions of the national and regional programs adopted. The Member States concerned are Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The Common Agricultural Policy was supported by funding 118 programs in all 28 Member States with € 99.6 billion from EU funds between 2014 and 2020 through the European Agricultural Fund of Rural Development (EAFRD), these measures being co-financed by additional national, regional and private funding. The adopted programs increase the number of approved PDOs up to 51, which means that programs worth over € 62billion (about 62.4% of the budget) have been approved so far. The new rural development regulation for the 2014-2020 period addresses six economic, environmental and social priorities, and the programs include clear objectives that set out the achievements. In addition, in order to better coordinate actions and maximize synergies with other European structural and investment funds (ESIF), a partnership agreement has been concluded with each Member State presenting the overall strategy for EU funded structural investments.

In a particular way, according to the National Rural Development Programme for 2014-2020, the financial framework had been allocated resources for activities mentioned in the table below:

Table 2: The allocation level of public funding by types of activities

Activity	Allocation 2007-2013 vers. XIII EUR Million	Performed paiements Nov. 2014 EUR Milion	Absorbtion degree %	Allocation 2014-2020 EUR Milion	% 2020/2013
I. Farm works	5512.5	4218.7	76.5297052	6107.3	110.7900227
II. Food Industry	963.2	297.8	30.9177741	546.1	56.69642857
III. Non - agricultural activities	760.3	330.2	43.4302249	291.1	38.28751808
IV. Rural Infrastructure	1610.9	1345.9	83.5495686	1281.4	79.54559563
V. Other activities	366.9	284.3	77.4870537	1105.6	301.3355138
Total overall	9324.8	6613.3	70.9216283	9331.5	100.0718514
Of which: - EU budget	8124.2			8015	98.65586765
national budget	1972.88			1316.5	66.72985686

Source: own calculations, after the communication of MARD and data taken from the article signed by Goşa et al.

Taking into account the information offered by Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, as can be seen from the data present in the table above, the financial allocation of EU through EAFRD differs from one programming period to another. For example, for farm work activities were allocated 5512.5 EUR million of which there were consumed 4218.7 EUR million, a considerable absorption of 76.53% of the allocated amount.

Through NRDP 2014-2020 is allocated an amount which will exceed the allowance of the previous financial cycle with 10.8%. In the opinion of the specialists in the field, this allocation difference will have a positive impact on the financial capacity for the agricultural holdings capitalization through equipping with advanced machinery and devices which will conduct to increase the labor productivity, especially within agricultural holdings of large size (Goşa et al.).

At national level, for the period 2014-2020, representing the new financial cycle, the Partnership Agreement (PA) is the document through which the Romanian Government has established the funding priorities for the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) with a global objective to reduce the differences, the disparities of economic and social development between Romania and the other EU Member States. On August 6, 2014, the European Commission approved the 2014-2020 Partnership Agreement with Romania regarding the use of structural funds and job creation for this period.

From the approached problematic perspective, the absorption of European funds in the Romanian agriculture aims to capitalize on the opportunity to transform the rural environment by modernizing the agricultural holdings and the processing units in the agri-food sector, rejuvenating the farmers' generations, diversifying the local economy and improving the infrastructure. At the same time, increasing the competitiveness of agriculture for the economic development of rural areas meant increased productivity, a better market integration of agricultural producers, substitution of imports, increased exports of added value products and changes in the agricultural products sector.

According to the National Rural Development Program, the following types of activities are eligible for funding:

- establishing, expanding and upgrading farm facilities (buildings, access roads, irrigation);
- pollution reduction and renewable energy technologies, storage facilities, marketing and processing, inclusion in the context of short chains, etc.
- investments in processing and marketing, including energy efficiency, marketing, storage, conditioning, adaptation to standards, etc.
- support for the restructuring of farms, especially small ones, and the rejuvenation of farmers' generation;
- risk management in the agri-food sector;
- counseling and training activities, through producer groups.

In this context, through this program, the following types of investments-activities or services were to be financed:

- investments for micro-enterprises and small non-agricultural enterprises in rural areas;
- improvement of local educational and healthcare infrastructure, water supply systems, sewage and local roads;
- restoration and preservation of cultural heritage;
- locally-generated strategies that ensure integrated approaches to local development;
- consultancy services and knowledge transfer actions for developing businesses in rural areas.

For the present research, we are only interested in those measures on rural infrastructure, establishing youth in agriculture and investments in farms. In this context, Romania attracted by July 2013 approximately € 5 billion from the European funds for rural development, which represents an absorption rate of about 58% of the total amount allocated through the NRDP 2007-2013, according to the official data provided by the Paying Agency for Rural Development and Fisheries (hereinafter PARDF).

Since the beginning of the NRDP in 2008, PARDF has managed 141 625 applications for financing worth over € 17.95 billion. By mid-2013, 87 307 projects have been selected to receive non-reimbursable funding worth more than € 6.13 billion, which represents a 83.48% employment rate of public funds available through EU funding and co-funding supported by the Romanian Government.

The European Structural and Investment Funds allocated to Romania for the period 2014-2020 amount to approximately € 43 billion, calculated in current prices in 2012. The first version of the Partnership Agreement 2014-2020 described the general framework for attracting European funds allocated for this period, providing the reformation of the current system by simplifying the institutional machinery in order to streamline absorption activities.

The Rural Development Program (RDP) for Romania was formally adopted by the European Commission on 26 May 2015, outlining Romania's priorities for using nearly € 9.5 billion of public money that is available for the 7- year period 2014-2020 (€ 8.1 billion from the EU budget, including € 112.3 million transferred from the CAP direct payments, and € 1.34 billion of national co-funding).

The RDP for Romania focuses mainly on 3 priority areas: promoting competitiveness and restructuring in Romania's large agricultural sector; environmental protection & climate change; and stimulating economic development, job creation and a better quality of life in Romanian villages, where the situation is frequently well below both EU and average national levels. Under the first of these priorities, 'Competitiveness of the

agricultural sector and sustainable forestry, the RDP will help modernize nearly 3 400 farms and cooperatives, support the development of more than 30 000 small farms, and help more than 9 400 young farmers to start up. Under the priority “Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry”, more than 1.3 million ha (over 10%) of agricultural land and more than 800 000 ha (12%) of forests will benefit from payments to support biodiversity and promote environmentally-friendly land management practices. A further 4.7 million ha will receive support in order to prevent land abandonment and soil erosion. Skills in the agricultural sector will be reinforced by some 184 000 training places, under the above two priorities. Under the priority “Social inclusion and local development in rural areas”, almost 27 000 jobs will be created in rural areas and the setting up and development of 3 000 non-agricultural businesses will be supported. Nearly 27% of the rural population should benefit from investments to improve rural infrastructure.

On the other hand 93% of the holdings are less than 5 ha-these are typically subsistence and semi-subsistence holdings, which manage the other 30% of the agricultural area. The average farm size is considerably smaller than the EU average (3.4 ha in RO compared to an EU average of 14.4ha). Average productivity is low, currently 30% of EU average levels, despite Romania's potential in the sector. The subsistence and semi-subsistence farms are poorly technically equipped and lack market orientation or involvement in cooperative activities, which could assist them to better integrate in markets. Access to credit and farm insurance is difficult for the sector overall, particularly for small farmers. Agriculture still provides some 30% of total employment in Romania, the largest share in the EU, six times higher than the EU average. There is a strong need for upgrading professional skills in agriculture, while at same time promoting economic diversification in rural areas. Basic infrastructure and access to services in the rural areas continue to be of poor quality and insufficiently developed. 40% of the rural population is at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The RDP will support investments in the modernization of nearly 3 400 farms and cooperatives, the development of more than 30 000 small farms and the setting up of more than 9 400 young farmers. Some 15 000 small farmers will also be supported to permanently transfer their holdings, promoting consolidation of holdings.

The RDP will support 435 projects for modernization of existing irrigation infrastructure, targeting nearly 400 000 hectares of agricultural land on which the use of water will be more efficient and adapted to increased water scarcity. This will be complemented by training & advisory actions to help farmers adapt farming practice to increase their efficiency of water use. There will be 870 investments targeting the reduction of GHG and NH₃ emissions (e.g. for manure storage).

Romania has also chosen to implement a separate thematic sub-program (with indicative financial allocation of € 320 million EAFRD funds) aimed to increase the competitiveness and enable restructuring of the fruit growing sector, a sector where Romania has climatic advantages and traditional strengths, but which has suffered from under-investment. Support is given for the setting-up of new orchards, reconversion of the old ones, fruit processing, cooperation projects, and the setting-up of producer groups within the sector.

The four biggest RDP measures in budgetary terms (total public funding) are: € 2.4 billion allocated to Measure 4 (Investments in physical assets); € 1.4 billion allocated to Measure 13 (Payments to areas facing natural or other specific constraints); € 1.3 billion allocated to Measure 7 (Basic services and village renewal in rural areas) € 1.1 billion allocated to Measure 6 (Farm and business development) .

Despite the economic progress registered with the accession in 2007 within the European Union, the Romanian economy is characterized by significant interregional discrepancies, being far from the level of development of the other EU Member States. However, the absorption of the European funds in agriculture and also in other sectors of activity remains an extremely important concern, a key resource for the development of our country's economy in the period 2014-2020.

At the end of 2017, the absorption rate of European funds through the National Rural Development Program 2014-2020 reached 33%, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development making payments of € 2.3 billion, out of a total ceiling of over € 8.1 billion, according to Cornel Ștefan, the Director of the National Rural Development and Rural Infrastructure Directorate within MARD.If, during the period 2007-2013, there was a low absorption rate of structural funds, in the period 2014-2020, in the context of the 2017 retrospective, our country was three times first in accessing European funds, in March and August to the EAGF funds and in the second quarter to the EAFRD funds. Also, in the second quarter of 2017, Romania was first in the EU ranking, with the largest amount absorbed through EAFRD of € 313.7 million, ahead of Poland, Italy, Germany and France . In the third quarter, we have a spectacular growth and we are talking about € 623 million, out of which we have already received € 471 million, amount which was not included in the presented data. Romania is surpassed only by France and Germany and is followed by Portugal, Great Britain, Italy, Austria and Poland. (...) Romania is a European performer in terms of absorption of European funds for rural development, at the level of June, because it ranks third in the European Union to the amounts actually absorbed on Pillar II through the NRDP. We are following France and Germany, with a difference of approximately € 200 million” said the MARD official, responsible for the European funds. Due to agriculture, Romania is at the top of the European

charts, taking into consideration the generous cereal and oilseed production. In 2016, Romania ranks first in the EU in sunflower production and second in the production of wheat and maize, after France, according to the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics. Encouraging domestic production is one of the main objectives undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2017, a goal for which the institution grants up to € 10 000 to support pork production and € 3 000 for tomato production, two categories of products for which Romania depends on imports. However, Romania's agriculture does not reach its full potential due to the massive fragmentation of agricultural areas, the lack of technology or of a functional irrigation system, these being some of the main reasons why Romania is registering at the main cultures some of the weakest yields per hectare in the EU.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The absorption of the European non-reimbursable funds in Romanian agriculture has seen an upward trend in recent years, due to a better collaboration between the Romanian institutions delegated with the implementation of measures to attract structural funds and the European Commission, as well as a better media coverage among young farmers through open dialogue, consulting sessions and continuous training courses. The major transformations brought by the development of the Romanian agriculture in the country's economy consisted in the increase of the rural infrastructure which led to an increase of productivity, innovation with equipment and technological machineries of the subsistence and semi-subsistence farms, the decrease of the unemployment in the villages, and last but not least, the training of young farmers and social inclusion.

The development and modernization of Romanian villages in a manner supported by the state and foreign authorities remain a major challenge for all persons interested in accessing such non-reimbursable structural funds.

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