

Communicating Populism

Comparing Actor Perceptions,
Media Coverage, and Effects
on Citizens in Europe

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1 Introduction

Comprehending and Investigating Populist Communication From a Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

Who would have believed in the first years of the 21st century that so many democracies across the globe would be put under such enormous pressure by populist movements, parties, and politicians; that the principles of liberal democracy such as the separation of powers, the rule of law, the freedom of the press, and minority rights, would come under such intense attack; that the term ‘political elite’ would have pejorative connotations for so many citizens; or that ethno-nationalist rhetoric would become such a common feature of public discourse? However, as populist parties and politicians have assumed power across Europe and beyond, there has been growing uncertainty, and some disagreement, about whether populism poses an existential threat to the very foundations of liberal democracy and its values, or whether it is refreshing representative democratic politics often characterized by declining political participation and disillusionment (e.g., Abts & Rummens, 2007; Canovan, 1999; Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2004). This volume seeks to contribute to current efforts from various social sciences that attempt to explain the circumstances and mechanisms that contribute to the success or failure of populism and populist communication in different countries, among different segments of the population, and in different types of media. It is guided by two major premises.

First, the authors in this collection begin with the assumption that populism can only be fully understood if the role played by communication and the media is taken seriously. Therefore, building upon prior work (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008; Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), it conceptualizes populism as a type of political communication that is characterized by specific, unique message elements and their

combination (e.g., Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018). Several recent publications have pointed out that despite the huge importance of, and changes in, the media environment, many analyses of populism have demonstrated a blind spot when it comes to the media and communicative processes (e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018). This has begun to change recently with publications focusing on, for example, online activities of populist actors (e.g., Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017; Krämer, 2017; Zulianello, Albertini, & Ceccobelli, 2018), media coverage of populism (e.g., Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018b), and the effects of populist elements of communication upon citizens (e.g., Müller et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2018; Wirz et al., 2018). However, there remain a lot of unanswered questions. With this volume, we seek to further contribute to this recently increasing interest in the communicative and media-related aspects of populism.

Second, the authors in this volume argue that our understanding of populism can hugely benefit from systematic comparisons of various national contexts, various groups of actors or organizations, and different types of media. Although the surge of populism may sometimes appear to be an almost uniform trend across countries, a closer look reveals that there are differences, for example, with respect to the historical development of populist parties and their electoral outcomes. These differences require explanation and, at the same time, constitute the invaluable variance that will enable us to identify the situational and structural factors that contribute to the rise and fall of populism. Again, such comparative studies of populist communication have long been scarce. Only recently, scholars have made considerable progress in this respect by applying internationally comparative designs to investigate the rhetoric of populists (e.g., Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Zulianello et al., 2018), media coverage of populism (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018a), citizen engagement with populist communication (e.g., Bobba, Cremonesi, Mancosu, & Seddone, 2018), and effects of populist communication (e.g., Müller et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2018). Ideally, such comparisons take into account the multi-level structure of factors influencing the senders, mediators, and receivers of populist communication by including, for example, contextual information regarding country characteristics such as unemployment rates or migration figures into their analysis (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018), but this also poses considerable conceptual and methodological challenges. The empirical chapters in this volume also contribute to the comparative perspective on populist communication by using systematically comparative designs, although they do not all apply multi-level approaches.

Populist Political Communication as a Multi-Dimensional and Gradual Phenomenon

As presented elsewhere (Aalberg et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018), the authors of this volume argue that communicative processes are crucial to understanding populism. Despite ongoing disputes about the concept, there is a growing consensus that looking at populism from a communication and media perspective offers unique and important insights into the functioning of populism, especially in times of a rapidly changing high-choice media environment that may have altered the very foundations of contemporary populist success (Van Aelst et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018).

In addition, scholars seem to agree that references to the communicative construction of, and a focus on, ‘a homogenous people’ can be regarded as a key component of populist ideology and mindset (‘people-centrism’, ‘heartland framing’) (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2004). This means that the primary defining feature of populism is the construction of an in-group of ‘the people’ or appealing to citizens’ identity as part of ‘the people’. However, since ‘the people’ is a vague term, it comes with different connotations and thus different meanings (e.g., the people as sovereign, class, ethnic group, nation, ordinary people) (e.g., Mény & Surel, 2002; also Laclau, 2005). These meanings can either be explicitly expressed in populist messages, or be more implicit. In that case, the connotations of terms such as ‘we’ or ‘the people’ must be recognized and reconstructed by audiences in the process of reception (see de Vreese et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2017). Other authors, also included in this volume, hold the view that a focus on restoring popular sovereignty, vis-à-vis the elites, constitutes another element that can be distinguished from both people-centrism and anti-elitism (i.e., the chapters by Blassnig et al., Maurer et al., and Esser et al.). Although such a focus on ‘the people’ may seem unproblematic and almost natural in democracies, populism is considered a threat to democracy by many scholars, politicians, and journalists because of its illiberal and authoritarian overtones. Many of its representatives tend to support a pure rule of the ‘real’ majoritarianism, oppose intermediaries such as the media and open political discourse, and show preference for ethnic and cultural homogeneity (e.g., Abts & Rummens, 2007).

The core element, ‘people-centrism’, is usually combined with other ideological or message elements, most importantly anti-elitism and anti-outgroup stances (see Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Political elites and horizontal or vertical out-groups (‘them’; e.g., immigrants, ethnic minorities, the wealthy) can be regarded as functional equivalents in that they represent the standard to which ‘the people’ (‘we’) are compared and contrasted with. Such a focus on intergroup differences can, on the

one hand, strengthen identification with the in-group, foster in-group favoritism, and contribute to self-enhancement and the reduction of self-uncertainty. On the other hand, it can give rise to notions of out-group homogeneity, negative stereotypes of out-groups, negative intergroup emotions, and scapegoating. By this, populism delivers a problematic answer to the ever-present problem of social cohesion that mass democracies are constantly confronted with and that becomes especially pressing in times of crisis when people look for quick and easy solutions and actors or groups they can hold accountable (e.g., Reinemann et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2018; and the theory chapter by Hameleers et al. in this volume).

It is apparent from the above that we consider populist political communication to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon that can present itself in many different shapes and forms. These forms are defined by the combination of different elements of populism, resulting in different types of, for example, left-wing, right-wing, or empty populism (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In addition, we regard populism as a phenomenon that can be more or less pronounced in the ideology and messaging of actors. This means that actors, parties, citizens, or media can score higher or lower on a populism scale depending on the importance of populist positions in their ideology or mindset or the frequency with which they spread populist message elements.

The Rise of Populism—Causes and Missing Links

Generally speaking, populist parties have gained traction in recent decades. In Europe, this process started in the 1980s, but has been particularly pronounced since the beginning of the new millennium and has further accelerated since 2012 (see Heinö, 2017, also Inglehart & Norris, 2016). This development has long been almost exclusively the result of the rise of right-wing populism. Whereas the average vote share of right-wing populist parties in European national elections was about 1 percent in the 1980s, it reached almost 13 percent in 2017. In contrast, left-wing populist parties lost support between the 1980s and 2012 but have gained ground again since then with an average of approximately 6 percent of votes in European national elections in 2017 (see Heinö, 2017, also Inglehart & Norris, 2016). This means that, taken together, populist actors from both the left and the right have been more successful in recent European elections than ever before, holding almost one out of every fifth seat in European national parliaments. In contrast, extremist, openly anti-democratic parties hold just 1.6 percent of all national parliamentary seats (Heinö, 2017). Moreover, populist parties have entered national governments in a number of European countries, including Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Switzerland. Even in Germany, where populist and extremist parties had been relatively unsuccessful for historical reasons, a right-wing

populist party has entered the national parliament in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis.

The reasons for the rise of populism seem to be complex. Generally, scholars distinguish between demand and supply-side factors that typically have to interact to enable populist actors to thrive (e.g., Guiso, Herrera, Morelli, & Sonno, 2017; van Kessel, 2013). Demand for populist politics among citizens is often considered to be triggered by rapid and far-reaching social change or situations of crisis that lead to feelings of anxiety and perceptions of deprivation and social injustice. Research particularly points towards *economic* and *cultural* developments that have in the past been successfully targeted, fueled, and instrumentalized by populists (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). On the one hand, economic or financial downfall and crisis can contribute to economic insecurity or suffering among the population who are then attracted to a ‘unified nativist’, protectionist, or isolationist response presented by populists as a solution to those problems (e.g., Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2016; Otjes, Ivaldi, Jupskas, & Mazzoleni, 2018). On the other hand, increasing social diversity brought about by migration and the emancipation of formerly underprivileged groups may trigger feelings of relative deprivation, fear of being disadvantaged and culturally side-lined, or even fear of becoming a victim of crime. More broadly, some authors suggest that globalization, which has brought about both economic insecurity *and* cultural threats, at least in some places, provides fertile ground for populism and redefines traditional political cleavages (Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018).

What is often missing from such explanations of populism is the fact that macro-level circumstances *as such* cannot be perceived directly by citizens and that their interpretation is not self-evident. Instead, perceptions of real-world circumstances and their interpretations are significantly affected by messages from political actors and the media. In fact, numerous studies conclude that media and politicians considerably influence citizens’ perceptions of, for example, the state of the economy (e.g., Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018; Lischka, 2015) or certain societal groups such as immigrants (e.g., Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016). Moreover, varying media diets and information environments result in diverging views and even misperceptions among different sections of the population (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2014). Therefore, it can be argued that citizens’ *information environment*, and the messages and interpretations of politics and the media, are a *missing link* that connects real-world circumstances and citizens’ perceptions. This information environment is often neglected in literature on the causes of populism, although it may be key to explaining its rise.

A similar observation can be made with respect to the supply-side factors. The fact that populist parties and politicians exist is not itself sufficient to explain their success or failure. Instead, these actors need to capitalize on the trends mentioned above, or even construct or exaggerate them,

for political gain. They need to make ‘the people’ and anti-elite or anti-outgroup stances key features of their messaging, and use various channels of communication to reach their target audiences in order to spread their version of reality, their political stances, and their attributions of responsibility. These channels can either be news media that pick up populist communication or channels of direct communication, most importantly, online and social media channels (e.g., Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016; Engesser et al., 2017; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

In order to account for the role played by intermediaries such as politicians and the media, Reinemann et al. (2017) suggest a heuristic model for the analysis of populist communication and its effects. The model includes different levels of analysis and explicitly distinguishes between real-world circumstances (macro-level), their representation in public discourse (meso-level), and citizen perceptions (micro-levels). This allows for the possibility that real-world conditions, their representation in political and media messages, and their perception by citizens may diverge and thereby either help or hinder the success of populist actors. In addition, the model also takes into account the possibility that the media themselves not only act as mediators of populist messages via political actors (*populism through the media*), but that they act as populist actors in their own right using populist rhetoric (*populism by the media*). A recent study shows, for example, that journalists, especially in tabloid newspapers, often present themselves as the voice of the people, portraying the people in a positive light and making advocative statements on their behalf. The same journalists also demonstrate an anti-establishment bias, portraying political elites in a negative light and making conflictive statements toward them (Wettstein et al., 2018a) (Figure 1.1).

Populist Political Communication in Comparative Perspective

In addition to a focus on the often ‘missing part’ played by communication and the media, we argue here, and elsewhere, that our understanding of populism can benefit from a systematic comparative investigation. In Figure 1.1, this notion is represented by the long-term structural, and the more short-term situational, contextual factors on the macro-level of the model. One major argument for the importance of a comparative approach comes from the simple observation that, although populism seems to be a global phenomenon (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo, & Ostiguy, 2017), the form, visibility, and success of populism varies considerably across nations. For example, whereas the governing populist parties in Hungary and Poland gained the support of more than half of the electorate in the last national elections, total vote shares of all populist parties are half that size or less in countries like Norway, the Netherlands, or the United Kingdom (e.g., Heinö, 2017).

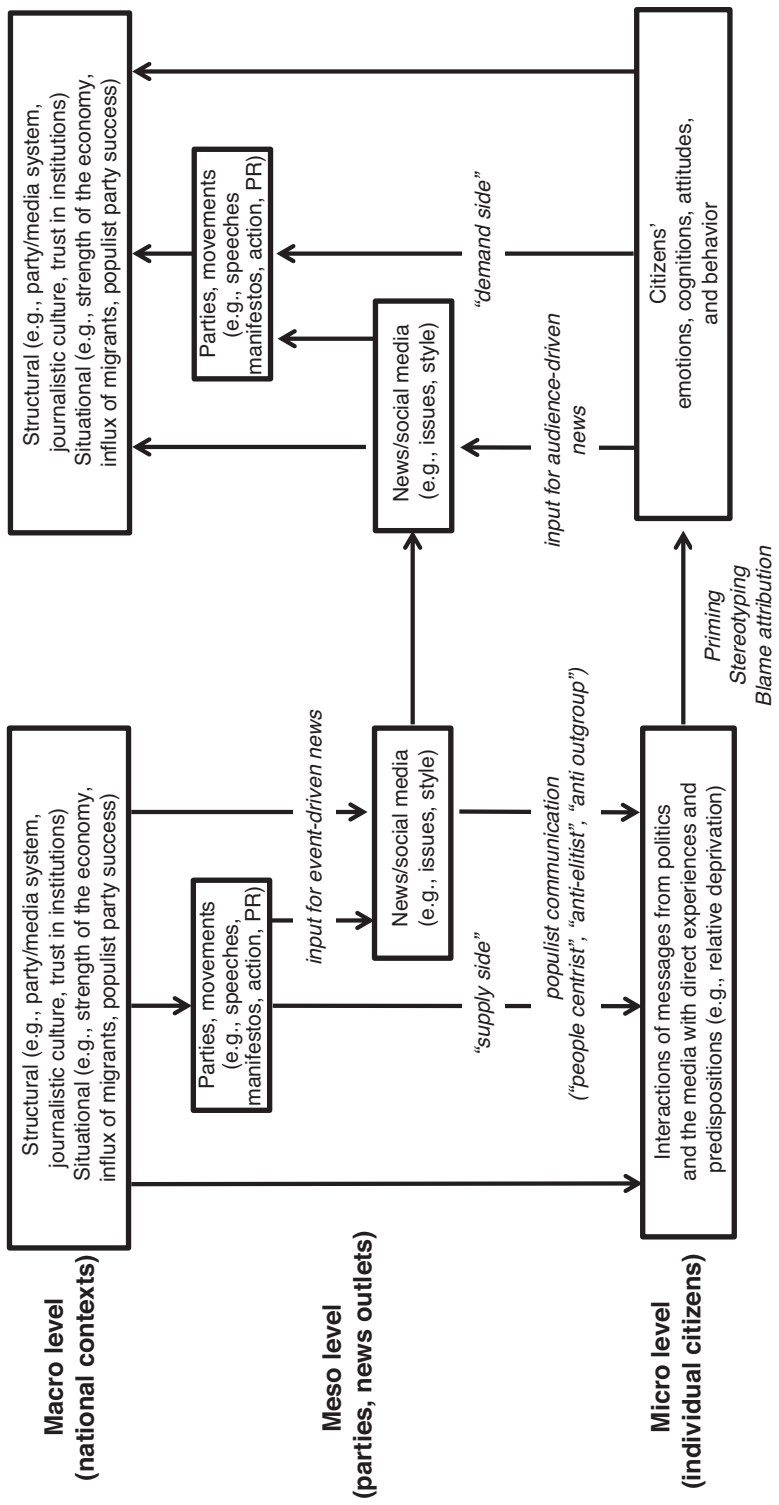


Figure 1.1 A model of populist political communication (based on Reinemann et al., 2017)

This points first of all to the relevance of contextual macro-level factors. Countries may be differently affected by negative economic or cultural developments such as financial or migration crises, providing different opportunity structures for populist messages. For example, a recent comparative study shows that the level of unemployment affects the mobilizing potential of populist messages (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018). Second, countries may also diverge with respect to their political culture or the general level of trust in the political system and therefore provide a more or less fertile ground for populist appeals in times of crisis or crisis rhetoric. Third, these factors may also affect how political actors and the media on the meso-level engage in, or react to, populist messaging. For example, Wettstein et al. (2018a) point to differences between countries like Belgium or France, within which established parties built a *cordon sanitaire* around populist parties by excluding them from any form of coalition, and countries in which populists have been a part of government such as Austria, Greece, or Bulgaria. Obviously, the political exclusion of populist actors in countries with a *cordon sanitaire* also encouraged journalists to depart from standard norms of neutrality and contributed to a coverage in which populists were treated as marginal, laughable, or dangerous.

Overall, only a comparative analysis can reveal and explain similarities and differences in the communicative aspects of populism across countries. However, as several authors have noted, there is still a lack of comparative analyses of populist communication—even if an increasing number of such studies have been published recently (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018; Wettstein et al., 2018b; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018; Zulianello et al., 2018). It is therefore still necessary to add to our understanding of populism by looking at it from a comparative perspective and to identify contextual (and individual-level) factors that might help to explain differences between countries. Only then will we achieve a more comprehensive understanding of today's populism.

The Genesis and Structure of This Volume

This volume answers the call for more communication-centered comparative research into the populism voiced in recent years (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018). Whereas attitudes, voting behavior, or party platforms have long been addressed in comparative studies (e.g., Oesch, 2008; Pauwels, 2014; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014), comparative approaches to populist political communication by politicians and parties (e.g., Ernst et al., 2017; Zulianello et al., 2018), the media (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018a), and citizens (e.g., Müller et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2018; Wirz et al., 2018) have only recently become more frequent. This book seeks to add to these studies and contribute to answering several key questions regarding populist political communication. The book presents theories and

findings from four collaborative and internationally comparative empirical studies, focusing on (1) politicians' and journalists' perceptions of populist communication; (2) media coverage of populism; and (3) effects of populist messages on citizens. The studies are based on comparative interview studies with journalists (13 countries) and politicians (11 countries), a large-scale comparative content analysis (12 countries), and a comparative cross-country experiment using nationally representative online surveys (15 countries).

These studies were conducted in the context of a research network that was funded by the European Union framework program Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST). With the help of COST, scholars from 31 European countries and various academic fields were able to come together and discuss questions related to 'Populist Political Communication in Europe' over a four-year period from 2014 to 2018. The three working groups concentrated on the parts played by communicators in politics and the media, media coverage, and citizens. This working group structure was reflected in the literature studies conducted by the members of the network that were published in Aalberg et al. (2017) and that structure is also reflected in this book. Regarding the genesis of this book, it is also important to note that although the European funds provided within the COST framework can be used to cover networking and meeting costs, they cannot be used to finance actual research, i.e., COST does not provide any money for staff, coding, or surveys. This means that the funds for the research presented in this book came from various sources and the fact that not all countries are present in all studies is often the result of a lack of national funding opportunities to enable research within this network.

With reference to the selection of countries for the different studies, it is also important to note that besides theoretical considerations, the structure and purpose of the COST scheme and network had an impact upon which countries could be covered. The projects had to rely on the voluntary participation of country experts present in the network, and their time and money resources were usually limited to one project. Therefore, although it would have been preferable for them, the different studies do not cover the same countries. But, despite that, the relatively large number of countries per study ensures that countries with varying macro-level characteristics, for example, from different regions with different economic situations and a varying degree of populist success, are represented in all four individual studies. From the total of 22 countries represented, two countries were covered in all four studies (Greece and Italy), six countries in three of the studies, ten countries in two of the studies, and four in just one (Austria, Ireland, Sweden, and Turkey). Seven of the 22 countries are from Southern Europe, another seven from Eastern Europe, three from Northern Europe, and six from Western Europe (see Table 1.1).¹

Table 1.1 Countries represented in the studies by European region

	<i>Perceptions of politicians (11 countries)</i>	<i>Perceptions of journalists (13 countries)</i>	<i>Media coverage (12 countries)</i>	<i>Effects on citizens (15 countries)</i>
<i>Southern Europe</i>				
Greece	○	○	○	○
France	–	○	○	○
Israel	–	–	○	○
Italy	○	○	○	○
Portugal	○	○	–	–
Spain	○	○	–	○
Turkey	–	○	–	–
<i>Eastern Europe</i>				
Bosnia and Herzegovina	○	○	–	–
Bulgaria	○	○	○	–
Czech Republic	–	○	○	–
Hungary	○	○	–	–
Poland	○	–	○	○
Romania	○	○	–	○
Serbia	–	○	○	–
<i>Northern Europe</i>				
Denmark	○	○	–	–
Norway	○	–	○	○
Sweden	–	–	–	○
<i>Western Europe</i>				
Austria	–	–	–	○
Germany	–	–	○	○
Ireland	–	–	–	○
Netherlands	–	–	–	○
Switzerland	–	–	○	○
United Kingdom	–	–	○	○

Part I: Populism and Communicators presents the results of interviews with journalists and politicians about how they perceive populism and the part played by the media. The chapters in this part argue that it is necessary to our understanding of populist communication, to consider the perspective of the actors. First, Salgado and Stanyer reflect on the rationale and methodological approach of the two interview studies (Chapter 2), then Stanyer et al. (Chapter 3) describe the results of interviews with journalists in 13 countries, and Salgado et al. (Chapter 4) report on

interviews with journalists conducted in a slightly different set of another 11 countries.

Reflecting the focus on media and communication, *Part II: Populism in the Media* includes three chapters presenting the theory, methods, and findings from a comparative content analysis of media in 12 European countries. Blassnig et al. explain the rationale of the study, its methodological approach, and some basic findings (Chapter 5). Maurer et al. look for the effects of contextual factors on the representation of populist message elements in media coverage (Chapter 6), and Esser et al. take a longitudinal perspective and examine the development of populist elements in media coverage over a period of one year (Chapter 7).

Part III: Populism and Citizens comprises four chapters in which Hamelaers et al. present a theoretical model of the effects of populist messages on citizens (Chapter 8) as well as the methodological approach of a comparative experiment conducted in 15 countries (Chapter 9). Key results of this experiment are presented in the next two chapters, with Corbu et al. focusing on cognitive effects, such as blame attribution and stereotypes (Chapter 10), and Andreadis et al. concentrating on effects on attitudes and voting intentions (Chapter 11).

The book closes with a concluding chapter by de Vreese et al. (Chapter 12) that both summarizes key findings from the studies and offers advice on that basis to politicians, journalists, and citizens who are wondering how to deal with the challenges posed by populism.

Note

1. This regional classification is based on Aalberg et al. (2017) which mainly takes into account characteristics of the media system and media-politics relations. There are, of course, various ways to classify countries as belonging to different regions, depending on the criteria that are used. France, for example, is placed in the group of Southern European countries when it comes to its type of media system (e.g., Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014), while the United Nations geoscheme for Europe and EuroVoc (the publications office of the EU) place France in Western Europe.

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