

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN: HISTORY AND CURRENT STATE OF FUNDING

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Abstract

This article analyzes the evolution and current state of financing of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kazakhstan. Particular attention is paid to the interaction between international donors and state structures at different stages of civil society development. Key challenges, such as dependence on grants, changes in legislation, and a low level of private donations, are discussed. Based on the analysis of current trends, recommendations are offered to improve the financial sustainability of NGOs through diversifying funding sources, strengthening partnerships with the state, and developing social entrepreneurship. Kazakhstan, after the January 2022 events, faced the need for real and profound changes, including in the sphere of interaction with the non-governmental sector. However, one of the most challenging aspects of NGO development, which directly affects the sustainability of the sector, is the issue of financing the activities of organizations. To realize the goal, the authors used and analyzed statistical data for 2018–2021, regulatory legal acts, and results of research conducted on this topic earlier.

The research has shown that today, there is a prevalence of state funding of NGOs with decreasing support from international donors and weak development of other alternative sources. Such a bias, despite the existing need for state support for the development of the

sector, at this stage actualizes diversification of funding sources, activation of NGOs themselves to expand the visibility of organizations, and the manifestation of political will to build real partnerships.

Key words: NGOs, government grants, Kazakhstan, civil society, state social order.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: NVO (nevyriausybinės organizacijos), valstybės dotacijos, Kazachstanas, pilietinė visuomenė, valstybės socialinė tvarka.

Introduction

This article explores the history and current state of financing for NGOs in Kazakhstan. By analyzing the evolution of funding sources, including government grants, international aid, and contributions from private companies and citizens, the article highlights key trends and shifts in NGO support over time. Additionally, it examines factors influencing the financial stability of NGOs and their interactions with public and private structures. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape, reference is made to recent research and reports by organizations focusing on civil society in Kazakhstan.

The events of January 2022 served as a shocking moment for Kazakhstan, with the reasons, nature, and motives of these events still lacking clear and unified assessments. In the immediate aftermath, the President of Kazakhstan criticized “grief activists,” referring to individuals identifying as “human rights defenders,” “free media,” and “foreign” figures (Inform.kz 2022), indirectly linking them to civil society. However, in subsequent discussions and assessments of the events, such rhetoric was not reiterated. Of note is the debate surrounding amendments to the Law “On Elections,” which proposes the exclusion of NGOs receiving foreign funding from participating in elections.

In Kazakhstan, the term “NGO” encompasses a wide range of organizations, including associations, foundations, public unions, and professional or sectoral unions. However, within the framework of the state social order, not all such entities qualify as NGOs. According to Kazakhstani legislation, NGOs are defined as organizations voluntarily established by citizens to achieve social, cultural, educational, or other publicly significant goals. For example, trade unions and professional associations may only qualify as NGOs if they meet specific legal conditions, as outlined in the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Non-Profit Organizations” (Law of RK 2001).

This discussion raises several pressing questions: What is the current state of NGO funding in Kazakhstan? Why is this issue critical for the development of civil society? What barriers must be overcome to establish a “new” and effective system of interaction between the government and civil society?

By addressing these questions, the article aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities for the NGO sector, offering recommendations to strengthen its role in fostering public well-being and supporting democratic development.

Literature review

The academic literature underscores the critical role of NGOs as intermediaries between the state and civil society, particularly during periods of socio-economic transition. Recent studies show the importance of various civil sector agents in strengthening democracy (Bernhard 2020; Mietzner 2021; Sénit 2020), supporting and strengthening social help through various mechanisms of interactions with the government and private sector (Bindman et al. 2019; Mirvis and Googins 2018; Mok et al. 2021; Nurmala et al. 2018), disseminating new practices and achieving sustainable development (Kurz 2021; Sénit 2020), and helping the state with the fight against the spreading of COVID-19 (Huda et al. 2021; Jiang 2020; Raimo et al. 2021).

NGOs play a leading role in the processes mentioned above. According to the United Nations, an NGO is defined as “a non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group, which is organized on a local, national, or international level to address issues in supporting public good” (UN n.d.).

The NGO sector in Central Asia is still in the process of establishing its position and influence. This is largely due to the relatively recent independence of the countries in the region, as well as the specific nature of their political regimes and patterns of interaction with civil society. In addition, the prevailing political culture continues to be shaped by the Soviet legacy, which limits the full development of participatory practices and civic engagement.

Nevertheless, data from the World Bank and the Civil Society Participation Index indicate a gradual positive trend. The index, which evaluates the extent and quality of civic participation on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high), shows incremental improvements in several Central Asian countries. For instance, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan improved its score from 5 in 2018 to 6 in 2020; Kazakhstan progressed from 2 to 3; and Uzbekistan advanced from 1 to 3 over the same period. These changes suggest increasing openness to civil society and growing institutional awareness of its role.

However, it is important to emphasize that, with the exception of Kazakhstan, civil society participation indicators across the region remain significantly below the global average (World Bank, n.d.). This highlights that civil society in Central Asia is still undergoing a formative phase, marked by both structural constraints and gradual institutional adaptation.

Furthermore, despite the existence of certain barriers, the NGO sector of countries of the region is undergoing some changes, which are, to some degree, facilitated by steps of governmental bodies to establish interaction mechanisms and support the development of civil society.

One of the key factors affecting the sustainability of NGOs in developing countries is access to consistent and adequate funding (de Lacerda Sanglard et al. 2022; Ebenezer et al. 2020; Gajdova and Majduchova 2018). In contexts where civic participation is low, support from the business sector is limited, and interactions with government bodies are

complex, NGOs often face significant challenges to their survival. These structural constraints serve as major obstacles to their long-term viability. Empirical studies focusing on Central Asia-particularly Kazakhstan-highlight that insufficient funding, a lack of diversified income sources, and inefficiencies within existing governmental support mechanisms continue to hinder the development of NGOs and, by extension, the broader civil society sector (Makhmutova and Akhmetova 2011; Naidenova et al. 2019; Turdubaeva 2018). In this regard, this article attempts to do an in-depth analysis of existing mechanisms and sources of NGO funding in Kazakhstan, identify barriers that hinder the sustainable development of NGOs, and propose recommendations for further development of this sector. Research is based on analysis of primary statistical data from 2018 to 2021, regulatory legal acts on issues of NGO funding, as well as analysis of secondary research data on existing literature on this topic.

Materials and methods

The study utilizes a mixed-method approach, both qualitative and quantitative, which provides an in-depth and multidimensional analysis of the evolution and current state of NGO funding in Kazakhstan. It also focuses on the impact of the January 2022 events on the civil sector and grant support. The research design is descriptive and analytical, aimed at studying the dynamics of state and international funding of NGOs and identifying challenges and opportunities after the January 2022 events. The analysis of documents and reports includes the study of normative acts and strategies regulating state social contracting and grant support to NGOs in Kazakhstan.

Results and analysis

History of the development of the NGO sector in Kazakhstan, and the issue of funding their activities

First phase. The emergence of the NGO sector in modern Kazakhstan dates back to the mid-80s, when several public organizations, independent trade unions, and media were created in the Kazakh SSR in the wake of the “perestroika” process. For instance, the “Nevada-Semipalatinsk” anti-nuclear movement is considered one of the prominent examples of an NGO of that period of time. According to S. D'yachenko (2007), from 1984 to 1994, about 400 NGOs were functioning in the territory of Kazakhstan.

In 1991, in response to the need for a legal framework to regulate emerging forms of societal engagement, the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic enacted the law On Public Associations of the Kazakh SSR. This legislation formally defined the concept of public associations and listed the types of organizations falling under this category. These included political parties, mass movements, trade and professional unions, women's organizations,

veterans' associations, organizations for persons with disabilities, youth and children's organizations, as well as scientific, technical, cultural, educational, sports, and other voluntary societies, including art unions and associations (Adilet.kz, n.d.).

The law was significant in that it introduced the principle of non-interference: the state was not to intervene in the internal affairs of public associations, and, conversely, public associations were expected not to interfere in the activities of the state.

Second phase. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a quantitative growth of NGOs (Diachenko 2007), with a low level of interest in the sector on the part of the state, which can be explained by the difficult socio-political and economic situation of a young and weak state. The main source of funding for that period was international donors (Alymkulova and Seipulnik 2005), which contributed to the emergence of the first sustainable and experienced NGOs in Kazakhstan that operate in the country to this day. This situation, however, pushed back the creation of their own civic culture based on the Kazakh context and experience.

During this period, the state began to take initial steps toward establishing cooperation with the civil sector. In 1996, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan On Public Associations was adopted, which marked a significant departure from the earlier law of the Kazakh SSR. The new legislation introduced provisions allowing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to interact with state bodies through formal agreements and contracts for the provision of specific services (Zakon.kz, n.d.). In other words, this law laid the foundation for the concept of state–NGO cooperation and introduced a potential new source of funding for NGO activities.

However, it is important to note that the 1996 law did not include provisions requiring NGOs to submit financial reports either to their members or to the broader public. Despite its adoption, the relationship between state institutions and NGOs largely remained formal and superficial (Pierobon, 2016), which hindered the development of alternative, state-supported funding mechanisms for civil society.

Third phase. The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the beginning of more active interaction between the state and the NGO sector. During this phase, institutional platforms for cooperation were established, facilitated by the emergence of proactive and experienced organizations (Lapins and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012), as well as the state's growing interest in democratization, partnership-building, and oversight of the sector. As part of these developments, a pilot competition for NGO projects was held in 2003, resulting in the implementation of 20 projects worth 10.7 million tenge. This initiative continued in subsequent years, with 20 projects funded for 9.7 million tenge in 2004 and 50 projects for over 59.7 million tenge in 2005 (Nukezhanov n.d.).

Fourth phase. This phase marked the consolidation of state funding mechanisms for NGOs through the adoption of the Law On State Social Order in 2005, allowing the government to become a key donor for NGOs. During this period, Kazakhstan's political regime strengthened, intensifying efforts to diminish opposition and reduce NGO reliance on international grants and influence (Pierobon 2016).

The law provided a stable funding source, supporting smaller and regional NGOs without access to international grants. However, it also led to the artificial expansion of the sector, including the rise of “one-day” organizations and government-organized non-governmental organizations (also known as GONGOs), alongside corruption (Ovcharenko 2005). Consequently, NGOs, in some cases, diverged from their mission to serve as an independent “third party” between the state and society.

State funding for social orders increased significantly during this period, rising from 53.3 million KZT (approximately 124,000 USD) in 2005 to over 1 billion KZT (approximately 2.4 million USD) by 2010 (Petrenko, 2019). By 2020, 59.4% of NGOs identified the state as their primary source of funding (Kaidarova, 2020). Despite this progress, issues of transparency in the selection process for state-funded organizations and the effectiveness of implemented projects remained unresolved. Reports by international organizations and discussions at civil forums concluded that state funding—when combined with international grants—was still insufficient to support sustainable NGO development due to inequality of access, lack of transparency, and limited organizational capacity (Kaznacheyev, n.d.; Chebotaryov, 2012; Makhmutova and Akhmetova, 2011). Despite these developments, transparency in selecting organizations for state funding, as well as the effectiveness of implemented projects, remained problematic. Reports by international organizations and discussions at civil forums concluded that state funding, combined with international grants, was insufficient to ensure sustainable NGO development due to inequality in access, lack of transparency, and weak organizational capacity (Kaznacheyev n.d.; Makhmutova and Akhmetova 2011).

Fifth phase. After 2010, government budget expenditures on social contracting for NGOs continued to grow, while international funding and grants steadily declined. In 2016, new mechanisms to support the sector were introduced, including state grants and awards for NGOs. To facilitate the implementation of these measures, the Center for Support of Civil Initiatives was established, acting as the operator of state grants and overseeing the execution of this state support program.

In addition, the government implemented new measures to enhance oversight of NGOs by launching the NGO Registration Database in 2017. Although registration in this database was initially voluntary, only registered NGOs that submitted annual reports on their activities were granted access to state funding through grants, bonuses, and social contracting. This development elicited mixed reactions, being perceived both as a form of state intervention in the civil sector and as an effort to exercise control over NGO activities.

This phase highlights the growing role of the state in shaping the NGO sector, balancing increased financial support with mechanisms aimed at regulating and monitoring the activities of NGOs.

Characteristics of the NGO sector in Kazakhstan

According to the data of the Bureau of National Statistics for 2020, there are more than 21,000 registered NGOs in Kazakhstan; however, only 13,000 organizations are active, which means that about 40% of registered NGOs do not operate, and this confirms the

instability of the sector. Furthermore, considering the current situation in the non-governmental sector, it could be noted that there is a regional imbalance, as well as a low representation of rural NGOs, despite the fact that 41% of the country's population lives in rural areas. Therefore, as a percentage of the total number of active NGOs, 33% of organizations operate in the two republican cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan, whereas only 18% of organizations operate in rural areas (Kaidarova 2020).

When examining the funding landscape and its sources for NGOs, several key trends emerge. According to a survey of NGO representatives presented in the 2020 National Report on the State of the Civil Sector, 59.4% of respondents identified government funding as their primary source of income. Additionally, 11.7% reported receiving support from foreign donors and grants, while 20.8% relied on donations from local legal entities. Interestingly, more than a third (37%) indicated that they use their own personal funds to sustain operations. Other sources of funding were less common, with only 9.8% citing membership fees and 9.4% mentioning income generated through commercial activities.

Discussion. Financing the NGO sector: status quo

These findings highlight the diverse but uneven funding base for NGOs in Kazakhstan, prompting a broader discussion on the sector's financial sustainability. The heavy reliance on government funding underscores the need for greater diversification, as overdependence on a single source can limit operational flexibility and independence. Moreover, the limited contributions from membership fees and commercial activities raise questions about the sector's capacity to generate self-sustaining revenue. This discussion calls for a closer examination of how NGOs can enhance their fundraising strategies, engage local communities more effectively, and build partnerships with private and international stakeholders to secure a more stable and diverse financial base. The government currently acts as the primary source of funding for NGOs in Kazakhstan. This is the result of a systematic policy aimed at increasing influence in this sector and building interaction, as reflected in funding volumes. According to official data, in the first years of the state social order program in 2005, approximately 60 million tenge were allocated for project implementation. By 2010, this amount exceeded 1 billion tenge, reaching 6 billion tenge in 2015 and continuing to grow.

State social order funding (2018–2021)

Between 2018 and 2021, funding for the state social order consistently exceeded 15 billion tenge, predominantly sourced from local budgets. As shown in Table 1, those years saw an increase in funding from local executive bodies, while central-level funding declined. This may indicate a more targeted approach to providing socially important services to regional populations. The funding allocated for the implementation of the state social order in Kazakhstan from 2018 to 2021 is presented in Table 1. The amounts are shown in both the national currency (Kazakhstani tenge [KZT]) and recalculated into U.S. dollars (USD)

based on the average annual exchange rates for each year.

Table 1. State Social Order Funding, 2018–2021 (in KZT and USD, thousand)
(The calculations are based on the following average exchange rates: 2018: 1 USD = 344.71 KZT; 2019: 1 USD = 382.75 KZT; 2020: 1 USD = 412.95 KZT; 2021: 1 USD = 424.43 KZT)

Year	Republican budget (KZT, thousand)	Local budget (KZT, thousand)	Republican budget (USD, thousand)	Local budget (USD, thousand)
2018	541,599.1	18,635,964.4	1,571.17	54,062.73
2019	476,216.4	16,930,513.7	1,244.20	44,233.87
2020	126,118.5	21,724,694.5	305.41	52,608.53
2021	92,806.3	19,513,706.5	218.66	45,976.27

Source of data: Ministry of Finance of RK

These conversions provide a clearer understanding of the funding levels in international monetary terms, facilitating comparisons and analysis.

In the context of implementing state social order projects, the majority of funding is allocated to social assistance and welfare, as well as the development of culture, sports, tourism, and the information space, as illustrated in Table 2. Conversely, the least amount of funding is directed toward projects in agriculture, environmental protection, wildlife conservation, and land relations. A potential risk in this area is the possibility of a shift in government policy priorities during emergencies (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), which could leave NGOs specializing in narrow fields and relying primarily on state social orders without financial support.

Table 2. The volume of financing of the state social order by directions, 2018–2021 (in USD, thousand)

Year	Total (USD, thousand)	General public services (USD, thousand)	Public order, security, legal, judicial, penitentiary activities (USD, thousand)	Education (USD, thousand)	Healthcare (USD, thousand)
2018	55,633.91	2,558.63	535.61	1,061.40	843.94
2019	45,478.07	1,624.68	304.64	1,216.59	596.80
2020	52,913.94	1,158.47	172.13	772.86	410.53
2021	46,194.93	1,786.90	53.43	553.93	195.84

Exchange rates used: 2018: 1 USD = 344.71 KZT; 2019: 1 USD = 382.75 KZT; 2020: 1 USD = 412.95 KZT; 2021: 1 USD = 424.43 KZT Source of data: Ministry of Finance of RK

Another source of state funding is the granting of NGO projects through the unified Civil Initiatives Support Center, as well as annual awards for the most effective and

successful NGOs.

According to the Civil Initiatives Support Center, from the date of establishment in 2016, more than 400 projects for a total of more than 7 billion tenge were implemented (CISC.kz 2022). However, the situation in 2018 around bankruptcy and liquidation of the Bank of Astana, when the Center was not able to withdraw its cash deposits from the bank to pay for the implementation of projects, showed the presence of management risks in this sector.

If we examine the literature on the NGO sector in Kazakhstan, it could be observed that most of the research includes country studies of civil society and NGOs by various international organizations. Moreover, these studies are aimed at studying the current state of NGOs and identifying obstacles for the development of this sector (Makhmutova and Akhmetova 2011; Naidenova et al. 2019; Turdubaeva 2018). The issue of funding the activities of NGOs is mentioned as one of the barriers to the sustainability of the sector and its development. According to the main argument of the research, the existing state mechanisms for financial support of NGOs are not fully transparent—there is a manifestation of favoritism and corruption, and there is an imbalance in the distribution of grants and social contracting.

Furthermore, the second largest source of funding for the activities of Kazakhstani NGOs is international grants from various global actors. In 2018, by a decree of the Government of Kazakhstan, a list of foreign grant-making entities was approved, comprising 98 organizations. These included financial institutions (such as the Asian Development Bank and the Eurasian Development Bank); public foundations (including the Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives); international organizations (UN, WHO, IAEA, OSCE); and governmental agencies (such as USAID, the European Union, the Government of Canada, and the U.S. Department of State) (Adilet.kz 2018). According to the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, approximately 200 NGOs in the country receive international funding each year, totaling around 5 billion tenge (Sputnik Kazakhstan 2018). Additionally, according to the U.S. Department of State budget data, nearly \$5 million has been allocated over the past three years to programs supporting countries in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia (USAID 2022).

In addition, it should be noted that not every organization receives or participates in competitions to implement projects funded by international donors. According to representatives of NGOs, non-governmental organizations themselves note that only the most experienced and qualified organizations have the opportunity to receive grants (Pierobon 2016); therefore, for young organizations with little experience and institutional human resources, it is difficult to receive such type of funding. Furthermore, another barrier for NGO funding is the topics and purposes of grants, which mostly depend on the international and domestic agenda of the organization providing grants.

For instance, in 2020, the Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan allocated more than 360 million tenge to NGOs in the form of grants for the implementation of various projects (Soros

Foundation-Kazakhstan 2020). At the same time, about 45% (more than 168 million tenge) of the allocated funds were directed to projects dedicated to socio-political issues: the protection of rights and freedoms, transparency, and accountability of state policy. In order to develop the NGO sector in Kazakhstan, new sources of funding should be introduced, by developing financing sources such as entrepreneurial business activities, charity, and interaction with the private sector, for instance. Crowdfunding mechanisms could be one of the ways to solve this problem. The Ministry of Public Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, together with experts in the field of civil society and representatives of NGOs, developed and approved new rules for grant financing. In total, more than 17 thousand NGOs work in the country, and more than 21 thousand public organizations are registered. To date, the number of people employed in the civil sector is about 25 thousand people.

To date, work is underway to create grant and award management services as part of automating the process of accepting and processing grant applications. The main purpose of the platform is digitalization and automation of grant-granting processes, the simplification of application review procedures, and the prevention of corruption risks.

Conclusion

Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan's NGO sector has undergone significant development, progressing through a formative phase in which international donors served as the primary source of funding. This support enabled organizations to survive, gain experience, and lay the foundation for a robust civil sector. Additionally, the active involvement of the state, through financial, legislative, and institutional support, has fostered stronger interactions between NGOs and government agencies, contributing to the sector's quantitative and qualitative growth. Over time, the reduction in international donor assistance has reshaped the funding landscape for NGOs, shifting the primary sources of financial support. In the 1990s and early 2000s, international grants were the mainstay of NGO funding (Diachenko 2007). However, since the adoption of the 2005 Law on State Social Order, the government has become the principal financier, providing funding through state social orders and grants. Today, the NGO sector faces the critical task of diversifying its funding sources. This can be achieved by increasing public engagement in NGO activities, launching targeted information campaigns, fostering networks, and promoting creativity and transparency within the sector. Concurrently, the state must take concrete steps to build genuine partnerships with NGOs, ensuring long-term collaboration and mutual support.

In conclusion, the analysis of the history and current state of NGO financing in Kazakhstan highlights several key trends and challenges. The variety of funding sources-ranging from government grants to contributions by international donors and private individuals-plays a pivotal role in shaping NGO activities. However, the dynamic nature of funding, influenced by socio-economic fluctuations, presents ongoing challenges to financial sustainability. To address these, NGOs must focus on versatile fundraising strategies,

strengthening partnerships with the business sector, and further diversifying their sources of support.

For the sustainable development of Kazakhstan's NGO sector, it is essential to continually monitor the financial environment, promote effective funding models, and emphasize the sector's social significance. By doing so, NGOs can enhance their contributions to public well-being and secure their role as a vital component of civil society.

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NEVYRIAUSYBINĖS ORGANIZACIJOS (NVO) KAZACHSTANE: ISTORIJA IR DABARTINĖ FINANSAVIMO BŪKLĖ

Anotacija. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama nevyriausybių organizacijų (NVO) finansavimo raida ir dabartinė padėtis Kazachstane. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas tarptautinių donorų ir valstybės struktūrų sąveikai skirtinguose pilietinės visuomenės vystymosi etapuose. Aptariami pagrindiniai iššūkiai, tokie kaip priklausomybė nuo dotacijų, įstatymų pakeitimai ir mažas privačių aukų lygis. Remiantis dabartinių tendencijų analize, siūlomos rekomendacijos gerinti NVO finansinį tvarumą diversifikuojant finansavimo šaltinius, stiprinant partnerystę su valstybe ir plėtojant socialinį verslumą. Kazachstanas po 2022 m. sausio mėn. įvykių susidūrė su realių ir esminių pokyčių poreikiu, įskaitant sąveikos su nevyriausybinio sektoriumi srityje. Tačiau vienas iš sudėtingiausių NVO plėtros aspektų, kuris tiesiogiai veikia sektoriaus tvarumą, yra organizacijų veiklos finansavimo klausimas. Tikslui įgyvendinti autoriai panaudojo ir išanalizavo 2018-2021 metų statistinius duomenis, norminius teisės aktus, taip pat anksčiau šia tema atliktų tyrimų rezultatus.

Tyrimas parodė, kaip šiandien vyrauja valstybės finansavimas NVO, mažėjant tarptautinių donorų paramai ir silpnai plėtojant kitus alternatyvius šaltinius. Nepaisant esamo valstybės paramos sektoriaus plėtrai poreikio, šiame etape būtina aktualizuoti finansavimo šaltinių diversifikavimą, pačių NVO aktyvinimą, siekiant plėsti organizacijų matomumą, bei kurti realias partnerystes.

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