

## The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia

Neil J. Melvin

### THE EU AND CENTRAL ASIA

For the first time since the collapse of communism, the EU is facing a strategic challenge in its external policies. The rise of Russia and China as international actors – with India close behind – and the growing confidence of some leading regional powers, such as Iran, are creating a serious threat to the EU's ambition to apply external policies that reflect European values. Against this background, the employment of the democracy – promotion agenda developed during the 1990s is unlikely to be effective and may even serve to weaken the position of the EU in key regions. This situation demands an urgent and far-reaching rethink of the approach the Union takes to external relations. If the EU is to remain a serious global actor, it will have to find ways to reconcile the imperative of engaging in difficult regions beyond the immediate European neighbourhood while also remaining true to the values of the Union.

An initial test of the Union's ability to meet the challenges of the shifting international order is taking the form of the EU's relationship with Central Asia. The region has recently emerged as an important focus for the EU for various reasons. Much has been made of the security challenges and energy opportunities in Central Asia – although it is also clear that obtaining access to energy resources is far from straightforward. Others have highlighted the

EU's obligation to foster democratisation and promote human rights in one of the world's most authoritarian regions. Above all, it is clear that the European Union's ability to exert a positive impact on regions vital to the EU within Eurasia, such as the south Caucasus and the Black Sea, and important countries – notably Russia, Ukraine and Afghanistan – will be greatly enhanced if the EU can also play a more active role in Central Asia.

Advancing the EU's interests in Central Asia while also remaining true to the Union's values will clearly be a tall order. Since independence, the region's leadership has shown an almost genetic disposition to despotic rule. Central Asia has also become the focus of attention for Moscow and Beijing, which are anxious to gain access to the region's energy resources and to ensure stability and security along their borders. Both are little troubled by the need to promote political reform in the region.

In response to the challenge of developing deeper relations with Central Asia, the European Union – following the initiative of the German Presidency – is drafting a Strategy for Central Asia. This is an important and welcome development. The strategy offers an opportunity to bring forward new and creative ways to address the issues that face Central Asia and to do so in a comprehensive and strategic fashion.

Finding the right mixture of policies will clearly be an important part of developing the EU Strategy for Central Asia. But there is also a more important task for the Strategy. If the EU is truly to be a strategic actor in Central Asia, then the Strategy must set out a path for engagement in the region that offers the prospect of enhancing the Union's influence through promoting policies that strengthen political, social and economic change in the region. In this respect, the Strategy should distinguish the EU from those international actors who are focused exclusively on stability and the status quo in the region. The Strategy should aim to build for the Union a clear identity as an agent for assisting with modernisation, reform and progressive development in the region in line with European standards. This will require careful, comprehensive and well-targeted policies and a light-footed approach. The key to the success of such a strategy will lie in identifying, engaging with and strengthening the dynamic of reform that already exists in key parts of the region.

### THE EU'S CHALLENGE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia is undergoing fundamental change. The change is multi-dimensional in character and uneven in its impact and it is simultaneously affecting the states and the societies of the region. As a result, Central Asia has

Neil J. Melvin is a Research Fellow at CEPS. This paper was originally presented at the CEPS Conference on 'Building Stronger Ties, Meeting New Challenges: The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia' on 2 March. The conference brought together representatives of European Union institutions, including Ambassador Pierre Morel (EU Special Representative for Central Asia), civil society organisations, the media and experts from Europe, Central Asia and North America. The author would like to thank the participants of the conference for comments on the paper. The Centre for European Policy Studies expresses its gratitude to the Open Society Institute – Brussels for its generous support of the conference.

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entered its most important period since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The way in which the current changes are managed is likely to define the future of the region for a generation, if not longer. In response to these changes either the region's existing political regimes will be restructured to meet the new conditions and, thereby provide the foundations for an authoritarian and unstable future, or parts of Central Asia will emerge as locations for substantial and sustainable processes of political, social and economic reform, with important implications for the wider region.

External actors will play a key role in defining the contours of change in the Central Asia. In recent years, a variety of powerful countries – principally China, the Russian Federation, and, to a lesser extent, the United States, Japan and Turkey – have sought to enhance their influence in Central Asia. The emphasis placed by many of these nations on ensuring stability – motivated in large part by interests in energy and other natural resources, geopolitics and by concerns about security threats from the region – raises the prospect that external influence will be directed to support the status quo in the region.

To date, the European Union has played a marginal role in Central Asia. The initiative by the German Presidency of the European Union to launch a process of rethinking the involvement of the EU in Central Asia, culminating with the production of a Strategy on Central Asia, is thus timely. The European Union has the opportunity to strengthen its presence at a strategic moment for Central Asia. At the same time, the EU is seeking to upgrade its role in Central Asia from a weak position and with little in the way of new or increased resources. Strengthening the Union's engagement in the region and enhancing its leverage can only be achieved realistically by playing to Europe's strengths.

The European Union cannot be a status quo actor in Central Asia. Such an approach would stand in opposition to European values and it would not be in the interests of the Union. Moreover, it would not be a politically tenable position amongst many of the Union's member states. The European Union's greatest strength is its commitment to

the combination of economic and social modernism, political pluralism, rule of law and cultural diversity. To compromise on these values would be to undermine the EU's influence in Central Asia and more widely. The EU must, therefore, set itself clearly apart from those that place stability above progressive change in the region.

This suggests that the EU should build its presence in Central Asia around the promotion of a forward-looking agenda of modernisation and social and political development. This can best be achieved through working with those groups, communities and countries that share a commitment with the EU to such change. That is, the EU should seek to find ways to assist the countries of the region to modernise and develop, in accordance with their own ambitions, while also ensuring this is not the modernisation agenda advanced by Russia and China ('shut up and shop'). The EU should focus its efforts on helping to build and strengthen the foundations for pluralism and law-based states and to reinforce and spread the reform dynamic across the region. In these ways, the EU can challenge efforts to renew authoritarianism in the region.

The EU's approach should be based upon looking for real opportunities for change and to make use of these. In concrete terms, the EU should support bilateral and trilateral initiatives and regional cooperation designed to build closer ties with Europe and to open the region more generally through transport, energy, trade and investment, and communication/media links, but also in terms of strengthening human capital and promoting exposure to new ideas and access to information. At the same time, the EU should aim to build a framework of political and security cooperation within the region that rewards and strengthens those that demonstrate a genuine commitment to reform. A framework of positive cooperation should demonstrate the benefits of reform and, thereby, place pressure on those who seek to oppose change and to challenge those who argue that sustaining authoritarian orders is the only way to ensure stability in the region.

With some of the most authoritarian regimes in the world, it is tempting to see little prospect for reform in Central Asia. The negative political image of the region is further compounded by analysis that stresses the traditional – family and clan – structure of Central Asian society and the prevalence of non-democratic values. The leaders that emerged to dominate the region in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union have further strengthened the idea that there is little scope for change by promoting an ideology of authoritarian rule as the only way to ensure stability in the region.

This is a depressing picture but it is also misleading. Central Asia is a diverse region with a wide variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious and social groups. It is also a region that has experienced different forms of political and economic development in the years since independence. Some countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, have seen the emergence of considerable political pluralism and a vibrant civil society. Others, such as Kazakhstan, have opted for economic reforms that have brought forth significant private business interests. Still others, such as Uzbekistan and – at least until recently – Turkmenistan have chosen a path of concentrating political and economic power within the hands of a narrow ruling circle.

The political, economic and social diversity that exists across Central Asia and the fact that apparently traditional societies – for example Kyrgyzstan is often identified as a country rent with clan alliances – can also be the basis for pluralist politics, suggest that it is not conservative values and social structures that have played the primary role in propelling the region towards authoritarian government but rather the interests and political actions of ruling elites.

In the years ahead, Central Asia is likely to become ever more diverse under the impact of internal change and external engagement and as a result of government policies. The change that will take place in the region will offer significant opportunities for promoting an agenda of reform and modernisation. There are five particular sources of

dynamism in Central Asia that offer the opportunity for EU engagement in support of reformist agendas:

- *Elite transition.* With the possible exception of Tajikistan, the states of Central Asia have entered an important period of elite change. The region's Soviet-era leadership is beginning to be replaced or is facing replacement in the near future. Differing models of transition have emerged; from the street and parliamentary politics of Kyrgyzstan to the committee-style transition of Turkmenistan. In both cases, however, the new leadership has indicated a desire for change in their countries and this offers opportunities for the EU to work to ensure that the transfer of power does not lead to the consolidation of new authoritarian regimes. In the future, the key elite transitions will be Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as these will have regional significance. In both cases, the EU should be ready to signal quickly its readiness to support the new governments in reform and modernization.
- *Economic change.* In recent years, the economies of Central Asia have experienced significant growth, although from low starting points, driven primarily by strong world prices for the region's natural resources. Hydrocarbon exports have played a basic role in this growth. As a result, parts of Central Asia are set to experience important economic development. Perhaps most significantly, Kazakhstan is emerging as by far the most wealthy and most dynamic economy. The growth of substantial indigenous economic resources within Central Asia offers new opportunities to promote a strengthening of investment, marketisation and economic integration between countries of the region.
- *Generational shifts.* While the population of Central Asia remains predominately poor, there are important changes underway across the region. Sizeable and influential groups are prospering and are looking for the emergence of societies and political orders that can accommodate their own

aspirations, including a desire to play a more active role in decision-making of various types and to ensure their property rights and security through rule of law. Central Asia is also witnessing the emergence into adulthood of the first truly post-Soviet generation. The desire for access to education including international higher education is stronger than ever. Many of those who have experienced post-Soviet education, especially abroad, hold significantly different views on the future of the region from the Soviet generation currently in charge of the region. Strengthening links between the emerging generations in Central Asia and the EU – principally through education – is likely to be one of the most important long-term agents for reform in the region.

- *Geopolitical influences.* During the first decade of independence, the countries of Central Asia pursued policies to consolidate their statehood by balancing relations between the former Soviet hegemon (Russia) and other international actors, while at the same time seeking to strengthen their position within the international system. The growing role of the Russian Federation and China in Central Asia in recent years points to a qualitative shift from the post-Soviet period and threatens to undermine the 'multi-vector' foreign policies of the countries in the region.

Anxious to avoid a return to external domination, some Central Asian governments (for example Uzbekistan currently) are seeking the involvement of other significant international actors in the region to help to balance the role of Russia and China. Some countries (notably Kazakhstan) are also looking to external actors to help with their integration into the competitive global economy. The EU has a clear opportunity to ensure that the desire among Central Asian countries to draw the EU into the region will be on the Union's terms.

- *New asymmetries in Central Asia.* The political, social and economic changes occurring in Central Asia

today – and that are likely to accelerate in the future – are creating new asymmetries in the region. These shifts will create new challenges – migration, greater inequality – and also new opportunities. The critical relationship is that between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan's rise threatens to eclipse Uzbekistan internationally and perhaps even Tashkent's role in Central Asia. The fact that Kazakhstan has indicated a willingness to pursue reform in cooperation with Europe but also that past reforms have created an internal dynamic for change within the country provides a basis for the EU to strengthen reform in the region and to underline that the current policies pursued by the leadership in Uzbekistan risk leading the country to marginalisation.

## PRIORITIES FOR THE EU IN CENTRAL ASIA

As the EU seeks to enhance its role in Central Asia, it faces a difficult task. The EU needs to build its leverage without even the distant prospect of membership of the Union for the countries of the region and it has at its disposal principally 'soft power' instruments. The Union also faces significant competition for influence from countries ready to commit greater resources to the region with little in the way of conditionality for their assistance in terms of political and human rights policies.

Given this situation, the EU cannot hope to build its engagement in Central Asia within the framework of conventional competitive great power policies. Rather, the EU must differentiate itself from the other external actors in the region by setting out a positive vision of a future Central Asia to be achieved through modernisation and reform. While many point to the forces of conservatism and elements of stasis in the region and, therefore, stress the need for stability and continuity, the EU should position itself to support and advance the attainment of this vision of change through building reform coalitions, including both civil society and leading figures and groups within the

authorities. But to achieve this, the EU will have to establish a comprehensive and carefully differentiated engagement across the region, designed to build leverage through rewarding positive change.

Leverage will only be successful if the EU accepts what it can do and avoids entering areas where it can have a marginal impact. The EU is unlikely to be able to build enough leverage to persuade the region's worst dictators to change their ways except at a cosmetic level – as demonstrated by the lack of real progress in the ongoing EU dialogue with Uzbekistan. The employment of ways to express dissatisfaction – including through a more effective sanctions regime – should remain alongside steps to reward positive developments.

## A REGIONAL STRATEGY OF BILATERAL RELATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

*Kazakhstan* is the most important country for the European Union in Central Asia. It will emerge as the region's most powerful nation based on its substantial natural resources and commitment to economic reform even without help from the EU. The Kazakhstani authorities have launched a number of significant initiatives aimed at updating their military, promoting modern education and they have signalled their ambitions to play a greater international political role, including as a leading regional actor. They have also demonstrated a clear ambition to bring about change within their country to integrate more effectively within the global economy. As a result, society in Kazakhstan is likely to undergo important additional changes with the emergence of new groups interested in further change in the country.

The European Union can only hope to build an effective strategy for Central Asia if it makes a significant commitment to strengthening the reform drive in Kazakhstan. This engagement should be two-fold in focus. First, the EU should step up its cooperation with the authorities and civil society groups in Kazakhstan to promote far closer ties with Europe in order to strengthen domestic processes of social and economic change. Secondly, the EU should intensify the

dialogue with Kazakhstan about political reform and a strengthening rule of law in the country focused on Kazakhstan's ambition to build closer links to European security and political institutions.

Kazakhstan should be offered a real prospect of chairing the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2009. In return Kazakhstan should introduce a set of measures designed to set in motion a process of change that will lay the foundation for the emergence of a genuine and sustainable political pluralism in the country. Kazakhstan's aim to strengthen its relationship with the Council of Europe could provide the basis for the country to be invited to join some of the Council's mechanism – inter alia the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Astana (the country's capital since 1997) could also develop enhanced cooperation with the EU in foreign and security policies (see below).

Success in helping Kazakhstan to move closer to a European-oriented process of modernisation and reform would have a substantial impact on the situation in Kazakhstan but would also represent a dramatic challenge to the leaders of other countries in Central Asia. It would also challenge other external actors who offer little in the way of a future for the region that is substantially different from the present.

*Kyrgyzstan* has demonstrated that political reform and a commitment by the international community to the support of civil society can help to establish the basis for the emergence of a diverse and dynamic politics. At the same time, the difficult economic situation in the country and problems created by corruption, extremism and substantial social divisions pose a constant challenge to the country's fledgling political pluralism. The EU should focus on strengthening rule of law and furthering economic development, alongside keeping political reform going forward. The EU should seek to play an active role in moving the authorities and the opposition away from confrontation and towards a more constructive political dialogue. Active work in the area of conflict prevention should be stepped up. As with Kazakhstan, building support among the new generation

through education should be a priority for the EU.

*Tajikistan* has some of the poorest communities in Central Asia. At the same time, the leadership of the country is growing increasingly authoritarian and undermining some of the positive power-sharing arrangements that were put in place in the country as part of the peace-building effort following the civil war (1992-97). In this sense, Tajikistan is at a turning point in which there is a real prospect of the emergence of a full-blown authoritarian order closely involved in corruption and narco-trafficking. Policies aimed to tackle poverty, corruption and drug trafficking should remain a priority for the EU. The bilateral EU-Tajikistan relationship is, however, likely to be limited reflecting the scale of the country's problems and the limited resources of the EU. For this reason, the EU should focus on cooperation with other external actors – notably the United States and Japan – on issues of development and the Union should aim to function as a catalyst for the engagement of multilateral organisations and IFIs in the country.

*Turkmenistan* has, until recently, been seen as the most stark example of a country in which the interests of the EU (principally access to gas) stand in opposition to its commitment to the values of democracy and to human rights. The death last December of Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's President-for-life, offers a significant opportunity for the EU to find a new relationship with Ashgabad. The EU must move quickly to deepen its dialogue with the new leadership of the country in order to build a significant and sustainable dynamic for reform. The EU should initially focus its engagement on helping the new leaders of the country to reverse the damage of the Niyazov era in the areas of education, health, rule of law and media. Work in these areas should be used to build confidence and establish the basis for a broader political discussion on reform.

*Uzbekistan* under President Islam Karimov has little to offer the European Union in terms of its efforts to enhance its role in the region and to strengthen reform dynamics. While there are pressures for change in Uzbekistan, the current political regime has through its harsh policies towards all voices critical

of the ruling regime ensured that these are channelled into violent confrontation and radical politics. President Karimov has provided no opportunities for reformist forces to emerge that could help to bring forth a more pluralist and modernising environment. A closer relationship with Tashkent is, thus, likely to tarnish the image of the Union in the region and more broadly and so weaken the EU's ability to play a positive role in Central Asia and in other difficult regions of the world.

While it may be important to maintain a limited political dialogue with Tashkent – in the hope of bringing about a softening of pressure on some individual human rights cases – this is highly unlikely to achieve anything other than cosmetic change. Tashkent must demonstrate a commitment to real reform and introduce the sort of changes that will break the iron grip of the authorities on society before there can be any serious commitment from the EU.

In the absence of such a shift in Tashkent, the EU should focus on engaging with Uzbekistan and the problems created by Tashkent's policies through the range of multilateral mechanisms within the region and through regional cooperation organisations. Here the particular concern should be on opening up Uzbekistan – focused especially on the borders and finding ways to reach the country's emerging generations through education and information/media policies. Non-official discussions between policy experts from Europe and Uzbekistan on a range of issues, including security issues, should be supported as a means to prepare cooperative agendas for the post-Karimov era.

## STRENGTHENING REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT

*Regional powers in Central Asia.* The growing attention to Central Asia by external actors, particularly focused on energy and security issues, risks the emergence of harmful competition and the strengthening of authoritarian politics in the region. This is a competition that the EU cannot win and it would be harmed if it tries to compete.

In response to this situation, the EU should adopt a three-fold policy. The EU should be firm in the promotion of its own vision of a future for Central Asia. Second, the EU should strive to forge significant political, economic and cultural relationships with countries in Central Asia that share the Union's vision of reform and that will strengthen the ability of those countries to balance the involvement of other external powers and to pursue their own national interests. Thirdly, the EU should seek to engage regional powers in forms of cooperation that can strengthen the EU's vision of change for Central Asia.

This should include, for example working with the Russian Federation in the areas of national minority rights, strengthening the Russian and other European languages in Central Asia and on educational issues, and keeping the region open to media and information, including Russian media, as well as combating drug trafficking. While with China, the EU should concentrate on cooperation around economic investment that diversifies the infrastructure of the region and serves further to open up Central Asia – especially focusing on border issues. Finally, the EU should consider working more closely with regional organisations on issues of regional security and economic cooperation – notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC).

It is also clear that the EU should coordinate its engagement with external actors that share a broadly common vision of Central Asia's future – international agencies such as the IMF, the World Bank and others – to help ensure that their activities are reinforcing positive change. Here the EU's political vision of change in the region could set the agenda for multilateral investment. Better coordination should be undertaken with the United States, Japan and, possibly, India on key issues to ensure that the activities of these countries do not work against the EU's policies for reform.

*Human capital and new ideas.* In terms of promoting a Central Asia that is friendly towards the EU, that is moving closer to the values of the EU and is committed to opening up to the world, the EU has considerable potential to

play a strong role using soft-power instruments focused on enhancing the region's human capital. Promoting a far better understanding of the European Union in the region is clearly a priority. Strengthening diplomatic representation is a useful step. But the contacts and information flows must go far wider. Support for the development of Central Asian professional groups and strengthened ties to such groups in Europe could help serve as a stimulus for change. Links between policy institutes in Europe and Central Asia could help to promote better mutual understanding and enhance regional knowledge of the successes of the EU and how these were achieved.

The EU also needs a far better understanding of the range of processes of change in the region through policy-relevant research. There is an urgent requirement for the EU to find out what the different people of the region want and not just rely for information on what the region's leaders say. This suggests that there is a clear need to enhance the region's indigenous educational and analytical capacity. Providing scholarships to Central Asian young people to attend European universities can be helpful. But this is not a substitute for developing indigenous educational and policy institutions oriented towards and perhaps supported by the EU. Ultimately, broad change in Central Asia is most likely to come from future generations educated to examine critically the world in which they live and wanting more than to spend their lives as politically passive subjects.

*Regional cooperation.* Central Asia is a diverse region and the contrasts are likely to become even sharper in the years ahead. Some observers have, therefore, questioned the need for an EU regional strategy and expressed scepticism, based on the lack of past success, about whether regional cooperation should be promoted by the EU. To give up on the agenda of regional cooperation would, however, be to give up on a variety of issues fundamental to the societies of Central Asia – notably improving regional water management and other environmental challenges, cross-border trade, education, labour migration and the creation of an energy market. Building such cooperation should, however, be approached in flexible

ways, including carefully focused and bilateral and trilateral initiatives that can build confidence and mutual understanding ahead of efforts to promote more comprehensive forms of regional cooperation.

*Rule of law and combating corruption.* Corruption is one of Central Asia's greatest challenges. Widespread corruption, including at the highest levels in many of the countries of the region squanders scarce resources and corrodes the legitimacy of state institutions. Challenging corruption through the promotion of rule of law should be a priority of the EU in Central Asia in order to ensure more effective and legitimate governance. It is also a priority that is likely to command broad popular support in the region. The EU should work with the governments and civil society of Central Asia to ensure that income from natural resources is dealt with in an accountable and transparent fashion. Allegations that financial institutions in Europe have played a key role as repositories for monies gained illegally by Central Asian dictators and their families should be thoroughly investigated.

*Security challenges.* In the years since independence, many of the leaders of Central Asia have developed security agendas focused on perceived threats to the states of the region. Within these agendas, those who criticise and politically oppose the ruling regimes are often lumped together with other more radical and violent threats.

Such understandings of security are incompatible with European notions of 'comprehensive' and 'human' security. In its dialogue with the authorities in Central Asia, the EU must move beyond narrow definitions of security and not be constrained by the anti-terrorism agenda promoted by many of the security services in the region. The EU should seek through dialogue to broaden concepts of security in Central Asia and also to strengthen cooperation in the area of regional security and conflict prevention activities.

This does not mean that the EU approach to security issues should be unfocused and confined to 'soft' questions. The EU should offer countries showing genuine progress in moving towards European norms the opportunity for a closer relationship to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Some Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan for example, might be invited to align some of its foreign policy positions formally with EU foreign and security policy 'declarations'. Cooperation might also be extended to practical issues with Central Asian states invited to contribute personnel to ESDP missions outside Central Asia, notably in the area of crisis management. In the future, the EU should seriously consider extending elements of the European Neighbourhood Policy to those states in Central Asia that demonstrate an active interest in a closer relationship to the EU and a preparedness to enter into a substantial dialogue on reform and development.

## CONCLUSIONS

Central Asia is at a crossroads in its post-independence development. As a result, the European Union has the opportunity to play a significant role in moving the region, or at a minimum parts of the region, away from authoritarian rule and towards more positive forms of political and economic development. Such a shift in the region would be in the EU's interests and also represent a significant strengthening of European norms in the post-Soviet space.

The EU Strategy for the region is an important step for the EU-Central Asia relationship but also, potentially, a signpost to the future direction of EU engagements in other parts of the world. Progress in Central Asia would indicate that the EU can move beyond its role as a European actor – through its policies of enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy – to being an international actor with a distinct approach and able to operate in the politically most difficult regions of the globe.

It is clear that for the EU and Central Asia, the Strategy document is only the beginning of a new relationship. Much will have to be done to ensure the implementation of the Strategy and to ensure that Central Asia receives increased resources in the years ahead. It will be critical to ensure that attention to the region is sustained beyond the German EU Presidency. What is equally important is that if the EU is to strengthen its influence in Central Asia, the Strategy will have to be underpinned by a clear, consistent and long-term political approach to the region that is in accordance with European values. It is only on this basis that the EU will be able to build an effective, sustainable and credible presence in the region.

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