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DEPOPULATION OF THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST. MAGADAN OBLAST: A CASE STUDY

Abstract: The paper presents spatial differentiation and causes of depopulation processes that began in Magadan Oblast in the Russian Far East after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the region under investigation, depopulation is very intensive. The analysis of changes in population in the lower-level administrative units allows for showing the differences in spatial distribution of depopulation in individual regions ["rayons"]. During the research surveys, allowing for a fuller understanding of the conditions and the process of depopulation, were conducted.

Key words: depopulation, population, migrations, Russia, Far East.

INTRODUCTION

After the fall of the Soviet Union depopulation processes began in Russia. Particularly large decrease of population occurred in the Far East areas. The second-largest decrease of population in the entire Russian Federation occurred in Magadan Oblast. During the period between the censuses 1989-2002, the population decreased from 392 000 to 182 726, thus by 53.38% (Itogi vserossijskoj perepisi naselenia 2002 goda, 2004). Larger decrease in population in this period occurred only in Chukotka Autonomous District ["Okrug"]. This paper presents the results of the field research carried out by the author in September and October 2005 in Magadan Oblast.

GOAL AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

The goal of the case study was the gathering of information about the region in the process of depopulation, by conducting surveys among its inhabitants and by observation of the centres where intensive depopulation processes occur. The preparatory stage consisted in the definition of the unit used in the case study. Among the subjects characterised by a very large decrease in population since 1991, that is, three autonomous districts:

Chukotka, Evenkia and Koryakia, as well as Magadan Oblast, the last one has been chosen as the place of research. The choice was made because of the number of inhabitants (Magadan Oblast had the largest population among the listed subjects). Another factor contributing to this choice were smaller formal problems related to the entry on the terrain of this unit.

The choice of a standardised technique enabling communication constituted the stage preceding the empirical study. Information was obtained directly, by conducting an extended survey among the inhabitants of the oblast. The advantages of this approach are: researcher's influence on the choice of respondents, control over the course of survey and the possibility to tackle the issues in all their aspects, related to phenomena from various spheres of social life.

AREA OF RESEARCH

Magadan Oblast, with its area of 462 400 km², is divided into eight regions ["rayons"] and a region of 1 200 km² (Magadan and two settlements of urban type, treated in this paper as Magadan Region). Eight regions are separate areas not divided into smaller units; only the Olsky Region is divided into two parts (Fig. 1). The distribution of the population of the whole oblast was characterised by a large spatial differentiation. Three regions in the north-east: Omsukchansky, Severo-Evensky and Srednekansky, which take up 55% of the oblast's area, were inhabited by only 8.43% of the whole population of the oblast in 2002. The smallest region – Magadan Region – however, whose area constitutes 0.26% of the total area of the unit, was inhabited in 2002 by as much as 58.24% of the entire population of the oblast.

SCOPE OF THE DEPOPULATION

Much smaller population decrease was characteristic for the northern regions: Yagodninsky, Susumansky and Srednekansky. In the period 1989-2002 in Yagodninsky Region population decreased by as much as 65.57%. The harshness of the climate makes it impossible to conduct agricultural activities in this area and the disadvantageous consequences of the economic transformation are the result of the increasing living expenses.

The smallest population changes occurred in regions: Olsky, Magadan and Severo-Evensky. The first two are located in very advantageous conditions (milder climate, access to the sea, proximity to the region's capital). Severo-Evensky Region is inhabited by a less numerous group of Russian population, and the Evens living in the region took hardly any action aiming at leaving the land. The population of Severo-Evensky Region decreased by 33.54% in the period 1989-2002.

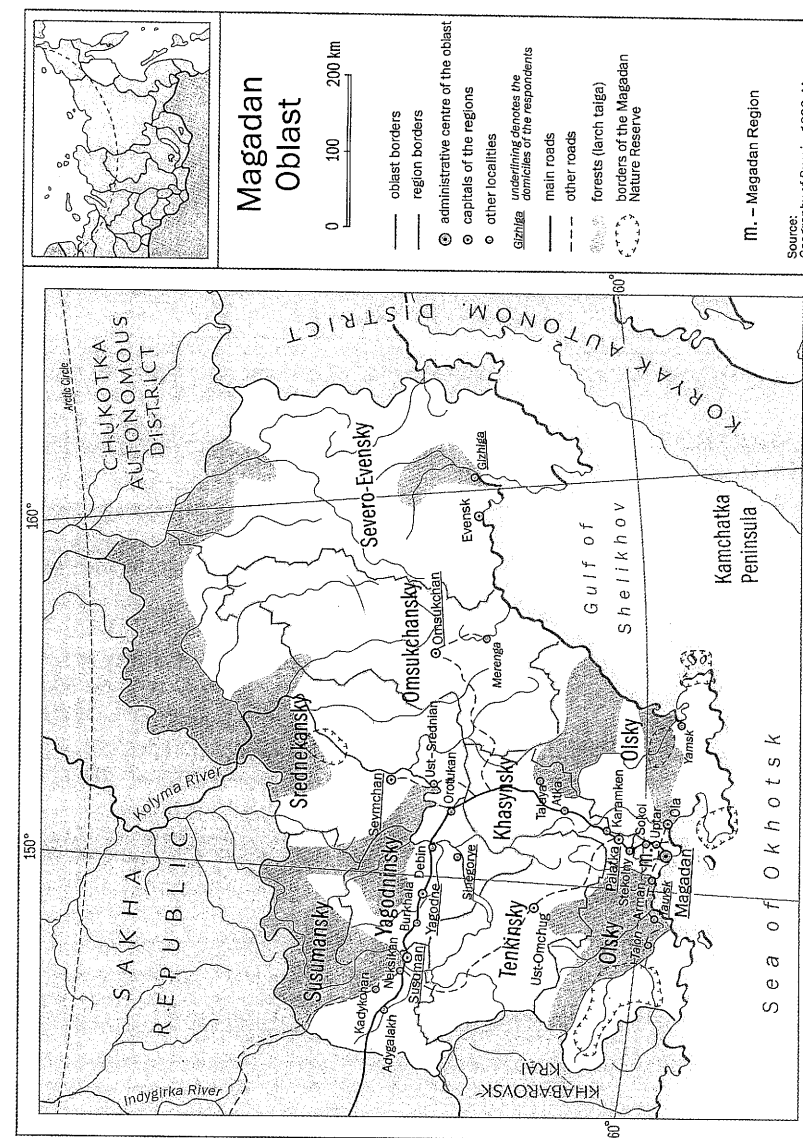


Fig. 1. Magadan Oblast

Record numbers of population decrease were observed in rural areas, since in 1989, 64 000 people lived outside the towns in the oblast, while in 2002, as few as 14 001. This was the largest decrease in the entire Russia (by over 78%).

Among the capitals of the regions the largest population decrease in the years 1989-2002 occurred in: Seymchan, Ust-Omchug and Omsukchan. The decrease of population in Seymchan in the period under investigation reached the record value (62.75%). All the centres indicated above are situated far from the main communication route of the oblast – the Kolyma Highway [Kolymsky Trakt], which is the only land route joining Magadan Oblast with the remaining part of Russia. The populations of Evensk and Magadan changed in the smallest degree (by over 30%). In Magadan the population decrease was to a certain degree compensated by the arrival of people living in the peripheral areas of the oblast, who regarded the capital as their new – temporary or permanent – domicile. In 1989, 152 000 people lived in Magadan, while in 2002, only 99 399.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

From among 40 respondents 27 lived in towns, of which 24 in Magadan. The decision to choose so many inhabitants of the capital was due to the fact that according to the census data, in 2002 almost 55% of the entire population of the oblast lived in Magadan. The next group of respondents, 10 people, consisted of inhabitants of settlements of urban type, mostly of capitals of regions: Yagodne (one person), Omsukchan (2), Palatka (2), Seymchan (3) and two people from Sinogorye on the Kolyma River, where the decrease in population in the period 1989-2002 reached the record value (64.90%). In 1989, 11 600 people lived in this settlement, while in 2002 only as few as 4 071. Less than 10% of population of Magadan Oblast lived in rural areas (7.66% in 2002), thus proportionally less than 10% of the respondents were inhabitants of villages (three people). Among the respondents there were 28 women and 12 men. The age interval in the group under investigation was rather large: the youngest respondent was 17 years old, the oldest one, 72. Twenty-three people were no more than 40 years old.

Thirty-three respondents were Russians and seven represented other nationalities. Among people belonging to the Indo-European family (37), the Slavic group was represented by 33 Russians and three Ukrainians, while the Ugro-Finnic group, by one Mari man. Two respondents were Evens, representing the Manchu-Tungus group, belonging to the Altaic family. One respondent represented the nations of Dagestan, belonging to the Caucasian family. From among all the respondents only 17 people were born in the Magadan Oblast and 23 came to the oblast, in particular in the 1980s. Three Russians spent most of their lives in Kazakhstan and since the mid-1990s

they had lived in Magadan. People returning to Russia from post-Soviet Central Asian republics were directed mostly to Far East.

SURVEYS

Each of the respondents was asked 32 questions. Two variables contribute to the process of depopulation: natural movement and migration saldo. To obtain information on the natural movement, 18 questions were asked, out of which five were directly related to the respondent, while 13 dealt with various aspects of life, observed by the respondent in his or her closest environment and influencing the course and scope of the natural movement.

The responses to the question: *When were the living conditions best?* were polarised. A period associated by some with the best living conditions was seen by other in an opposite way. According to 42% of the respondents, life was best in the period up to 1991 (mostly oldest people, reminiscing with fondness about Soviet times), while according to 25%, in 1990s (young people, who did not remember the times before 1991 and for whom the beginning of the 21st century is very difficult). Finally, 33% of the respondents (young, well educated people, usually not remembering the Soviet times) named current years as the period when life conditions are best.

When asked: *When were the living conditions worst?* one person answered that it was before 1991, while the largest group (55%) indicated the 1990s. This is the opinion both of the oldest and the middle-aged people, who emphasised that it was exactly because of that that many people emigrated in that period, while they themselves remained and many of them regret their decision. The beginning of the 21st century was indicated as the period with the most difficult living conditions by 42.5% of the respondents (the oldest ones). These respondents observe continual, gradual deterioration of the situation and increasing dissatisfaction.

It is possible that similar answers to the first two questions would be given by the inhabitants of various parts of Russia, also of those not affected by depopulation processes.

When asked: *What influenced the deterioration of the material situation most?* the largest group (45%) indicated earnings, which remained the same in recent years, despite of sudden increases of rent and central heating charges. Despite of the existing system of subsidies and discounts for the population of the North, the decrease in the value of money was clearly felt. One of the respondents gave an example: Before the fall of the USSR, his monthly salary was sufficient to travel, for instance, to Moscow, pay travel expenses, live well and save some money. Nowadays, earnings are hardly sufficient for current living expenses. A numerous group indicated that the deterioration of living conditions was influenced to the largest extent by the rent (30%) and also increase in food prices (15%). Prices of foodstuffs in Magadan Oblast are very high and sometimes exceed those in Moscow,

which comes from the fact that almost all food is delivered to the oblast by ships.

When asked: *On which authorities can you count in the largest degree when you need assistance?* 67.5% indicated "none". Some people remarked that the most helpful are not authorities, but parents (in students' opinion) and friends (in middle-aged people's opinion). Among authorities providing assistance, state authorities were mentioned first (15%) and town and oblast authorities next (5% each). The most criticised were local authorities; they were accused of partiality and corruption and were trusted by people only to a negligible degree.

When asked: *Which of the natural factors makes life difficult in the largest degree?* as many as 40% of the respondents indicated air temperature. Positive temperature occurs only during a few months, while the mean temperature in Magadan Oblast in January is equal to -31°C . Another 27.5% of the respondents were not able to name the most oppressive factor, since they got used to the climate conditions. Some even replied that the environment not only does not make life difficult, but has a positive influence on life. 22.5% of the respondents complained about bitterly cold wind and the smallest group about mosquitoes. Although insects make life unpleasant for a few months each year, every tenth respondent named their bothersome presence.

Next group of questions was related to the changes after the fall of USSR observed in the closest environment. The notion of "closest environment" was not defined in a more detailed way on purpose (family, neighbours, friends, but also other people), since many questions were personal and the author did not intend to offend anyone. The majority of the respondents gave numerous examples, more often related to friends, but also to the family.

When asked: *What changes do you see in the number of marriages after 1991?* 40% was of the opinion that the number of marriages definitely decreased after the fall of USSR. Young people claimed that due to the lack of one's own accommodation many young couples live with their in-laws, which causes more conflicts and leads to divorces. 32.5% of the respondents were of the opinion that the number of marriages increased slightly, especially in 2003 and 2004. It is probable that this is related to the program "Apartment for the young family", consisting in giving preferential loans for the purchase of an apartment (15% of the apartment value has to be paid in advance and the remaining amount can be paid off over ten years). Participants in the program are people up to 30 years of age, married or having children and remaining in informal partnerships. One person is entitled to 18 m² of floor area and to an additional 18 m² for each child, which may be born in the future. In the budget of the oblast for 2004 four million roubles were allotted for the implementation of the program (Butkeev V., 2004).

When asked: *What changes do you see in the number of divorces after 1991?* nobody replied that their number decreased, while 57.5% were of the opinion that it definitely increased. A wide range of conflict-generating situations accompanying the economic transformation explains this situation.

Older people stressed that the very large percentage of divorces and their wide social acceptance are the result of the small role of religion in the life of the inhabitants of the oblast.

When asked: *What changes do you see in the number of births after 1991?* a slightly more numerous group of the respondents was of the opinion that the number of births increased slightly (45%) than that it decreased (35%). In the former group there was definitely more men, while in the latter, women predominated. Evens and Russians, but only the older ones, were convinced that the number of births increased. Young people, on the other hand, usually indicated constant decrease of the number of births.

When asked: *What changes do you see in the number of abortions after 1991?* men clearly stressed their lack of knowledge. Women talked about that fairly willingly, giving examples from their circle of friends, less frequently from their own family. 47.5% of the respondents were of the opinion that the number of abortions definitely increased after 1991. Young and middle-aged people, especially inhabitants of Magadan, presented such opinions. A slight increase of the number of abortions was indicated by 37.5% of respondents (in particular by the oldest people).

Among replies to questions about the changes of the number of people developing cardiovascular diseases and cancer, there were none indicating a decrease in the number of cases. When asked about cardiovascular diseases (including heart attacks), as much as 62.5% indicated that the number of cases definitely increased after the fall of the USSR, and as regards cancer, such opinion was represented by half of the respondents. The older the person, the more willingly he or she talked about illnesses, emphasising their knowledge of this topic and giving numerous examples.

When asked: *What changes do you see in crime after 1991?* the largest number of replies indicating a significant increase was given (72.5%). Young people present more divergent remarks on this topic, while older people opined that the number of crimes is very large and results from greater freedom enjoyed by the young people. During the research the local press announced that during one week in September 2004 in Magadan 34 criminal offences were committed, of which only 16 were detected. When asked a question related to crime, namely: *What changes do you see in the number of homicides after 1991?* 55% of the respondents replied that their number increased slightly, 35% indicated a very large increase (total of 90% of responses indicating growth). The majority of the respondents indicated a clear connection between the number of homicides and alcohol consumption. One can also suspect that the high crime rate results from the fact that even after the closing down of labour camps, prisons were built in the area under investigation, and people released from prisons not infrequently decided to remain in Magadan Oblast.

When asked: *What changes do you see in the number of suicides after 1991?* a very large increase was indicated by 42.5% of the respondents and a slight one, by 35% (together 77.5%). A fairly numerous group (22.5%) replied that in the Far East always more people decided to take one's own life than

in the European part of Russia. This is explained by the difficulties in adaptation to disadvantageous living conditions. The respondents opined that most often it is middle-aged men who decide to commit suicide.

The next two questions dealt with the changes in alcohol consumption and drug use after the fall of the USSR. In the case of the question: *What changes do you see in alcohol consumption after 1991?* as many as 72.5% of the respondents replied that nowadays much more alcohol is consumed; 10%, that slightly more; while 17.5% stressed that there are no changes, which indicates a large, continual alcohol consumption. When asked: *What changes do you see in drug use after 1991?* a large group of respondents replied that the popularity of drugs constantly increases, especially among young people. 60% indicated that drug use increased significantly, 27.5% that it increased slightly (total of 87.5% indications of growth) and nobody observed a reverse trend. Older people replied that they encounter this problem indirectly, through television, press and observations. The youngest respondents emphasised that the interest in drugs is realised at the expenses of a decrease in alcohol consumption. Respondents in Magadan were best informed about drug use.

The last two questions, dealing with social issues, were related to industrial accidents and unemployment. When asked: *What changes do you see in the number of industrial accidents after 1991?* many people stressed that information on this topic is not often announced publicly. The largest group of respondents (60%) replied that the number of accidents did not change after 1991, that they occurred in the past and occur nowadays. 25% of the respondents replied that the number of accidents increased slightly. This is a result of the wear and tear of equipment as well as of disobeying the safety measures.

When asked: *What changes do you see in unemployment after 1991?* 85% of the respondents indicated growth. Particularly middle-aged people, especially in the capital of the oblast, feel the lack of jobs. Even though the largest group of people left Magadan, many people arriving to the capital from the peripheral areas are waiting for jobs. 15% of the respondents replied that the number of unemployed people did not change after 1991. Such replies occur in particular among the youngest people.

In the group of questions about migrations, seven concerned the respondents directly and were related to a possible decision about leaving the area, while the next seven was intended to supply information about leaving the area after the fall of the USSR observed in the closest environment. When asked: *Do you want to leave?* 65% replied positively, 15% negatively and 20% found it hard to make a decision. In the group of people who wanted to leave there were people from all age groups, including the oldest respondent (72 years old man), in particular those who came to the Far East around 10-20 years ago. These people have no problems with moving to another place and a new change of domicile does not create a significant inconvenience for them. Among those who do not want to leave the majority are people born in Magadan Oblast. This is true, among others, about the Evens, who claim that there is

no place in Russia where they would be better off; they exhibited great attachment to their land, tradition and culture. Russian women taking care of their parents and children stressed the impossibility of leaving.

When asked: *What was the most important factor in your decision not to leave?* 55% of the respondents indicated lack of money for living expenses at the new place; 17.5%, fear of change of domicile; 10%, family; 5%, travel expenses; and 12.5%, other factors. Middle-aged people, born in Magadan Oblast, expressed in particular fear about the new place. Young people named study, but most of them believed that finishing school would make it possible for them to emigrate and find a decent job in the new place. One of the respondents, a young woman, replied that she didn't want to leave because of her patriotism and as a protest against the overwhelming pressure to change one's domicile.

When asked: *With whom would you like to leave?* as many as 75% of the respondents replied that they would leave only with the whole family; 7.5%, with part of the family; 2.5%, with a friend; for 10% it does not matter and only 5% would decide to leave alone. This indicates the existence of very strong family ties, responsibility and prudence.

When asked: *If you could decide where to live in the future, where would you like to go?* 75% of the respondents named the European part of Russia; 10%, the Asiatic part of the country; and 15% would like to emigrate abroad. People who would like to move to the southern part of the Asiatic part of Russia are mostly those who have family there and who believe that they would never be able to afford to travel beyond the Ural Mountains. Foreign countries as the place of the future stay were indicated by people of non-Russian nationalities, in particular Ukrainians. They believed that they would be better off among their own people, where they would have full rights. Among remote countries, the United States were named by a few young Russians who study English at school.

When asked: *In what settlement unit would you like to live?* 57.5% of the respondents named a small town; 37.5%, a large town or city; while 5% declared they would like to live in the countryside. In general, inhabitants of Magadan would like to move to a large centre. Among people who would like to leave for a small town there are inhabitants of settlements of urban type, as well as some people from Susuman. People currently living in the countryside named countryside as their future domicile.

When asked: *Would you decide to leave if both housing and a job would be provided for you or would you also leave in a less advantageous situation?* 72.5% of the respondents replied that their decision about leaving is contingent upon having both housing and a job provided; for 20% housing would be a sufficient impulse and for 7.5%, a job. Young people would be able to move in a less advantageous situation.

When asked: *When deciding about leaving, would you consider the possibility of returning?* 42.5% of the respondents replied that they would, but only for a visit (young people), while 35% of the respondents, usually mid-

dle-aged and oldest, would not. 17.5% replied that at the moment they were not able to foresee their behaviour.

The last group of questions dealt with migration in the closest environment after the fall of the USSR. When asked: *How many people from the closest environment left after 1991?* half of the respondents replied that several tens of people left; 30%, a few people; and 20%, a few hundred people. When asked: *Who were the people leaving?* 48% of the respondents named friends; 30%, neighbours; 15%, remote relatives; and 7%, people from the closest family. Inhabitants of Magadan decided to emigrate alone more often. Respondents indicating neighbours as emigrants live in general in smaller centres.

When asked: *In what period did the largest number of people leave Magadan Oblast?* 60% of the respondents indicated the years 1996-2001; 27.5%, the period from 2002; and only 12.5%, the years 1991-1995. Respondents explain this situation by the fact that immediately after the fall of the USSR the changes were relatively small and only the quick deterioration of living conditions in the next years accelerated the making of the decision to leave. Nowadays it is more difficult to leave, although it does not mean that migrations ceased.

When asked: *Where did the migrants go?* 82.5% of the respondents indicated the European part of the country; 10%, foreign countries; and only 7.5% the southern part of the Asiatic part of Russia. Few people wanted to go to European countries, because of large distance and difficulties with assimilation. Almost nobody went, for instance, to Japan, because of language difficulties, formal difficulties (the need to obtain a visa) or different mentality. The European part of Russia is identified with more advantageous environmental conditions and the proximity of centres of decision-making.

When asked: *In what kind of settlement do most friends who have already left live?* 62.5% of the respondents named a large town or city, 12.5%, countryside and 10%, a small town. These answers are not confirmed by the literature of the subject. Z. A. Zayontskovskaya (1999) wrote that in mid-1990s many people from Magadan Oblast had the opportunity to settle in rural areas of Kurski Oblast in the European part of the country.

When asked: *What do you think about other people's emigration?* 67.5% of the respondents fully supported this decision, 27.5% were indifferent, 2.5% found it difficult to judge and only 2.5% did not support the decision of others to leave. Indifference was expressed to a larger degree by older people who said that it did not matter to them at all.

When asked the last question: *Did the emigration of other people improve your material situation?* 82.5% replied that migration decisions of other people had no impact on their own financial condition, 12.5% stated that after many people had left, their own material situation actually deteriorated. Only 5% of the respondents stated that the emigration of other people had a positive impact on their own life, since they received assistance from them. They indicated that money is borrowed for the move or else constitutes short-term support.

An important stage of the fieldwork was the observation of centres where the depopulation processes influence the appearance of the settlements. In Magadan it is more difficult to notice buildings abandoned permanently. Most buildings were still inhabited, although one could not see any work aiming at their renovation. A few respondents mentioned that when cooperation between Alaska state and Magadan began, the inhabitants of a few buildings obtained tangible results (renovations have been performed). The impression of disorder in Magadan is reinforced by architectural chaos (large houses built of concrete, fishermen's huts and buildings of public use). One can also see constructions begun in the early 1990s, where obviously no further work is being done. After the fall of the USSR underfinancing on the part of the state contributed to halting of many investments and constructions.

The scope of depopulation is visible to a larger degree outside the capital. The decrease in the number of inhabitants leaves permanent traces in the appearance of the settlements. Some of the abandoned buildings became entirely destroyed. Other were only temporarily protected, waiting for being sold. Partly abandoned houses, whose inhabitants live in particularly poor conditions, also exist. The costs of supplying water and heating to the buildings increase. Some respondents claimed that housing cooperatives control clandestinely the process of abandonment of houses. Climate conditions "help" the local authorities in their policy of relocating people from entire multi-apartment houses. Lack of electric heating in winter when temperature often falls below -40°C impacts the increase of costs of maintaining apartments by the remaining inhabitants. Depopulated settlements require maintenance measures to ensure safety.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the population changes in lower-level administrative units performed in the study allowed for showing the differences in the spatial distribution of depopulation in the regions. Surveys allowed for fuller understanding of conditions and development of depopulation. An important stage of the fieldwork was the observation of centres, where intensive depopulation processes took place, influencing the appearance of the settlements. Detailed research confirmed the thesis that the socio-cultural transformations caused by economic factors are the direct cause of depopulation of these areas. The migration of population, in particular in smaller centres, should be associated with the feeling of danger and hopelessness. For the remaining population it is difficult to adapt to the new situation, because, among other things, of sudden limitations on the ways to spend free time, and most of all, because of less regular supplies of food.

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