

DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE AUTHORITIES AND THE VETERAN SECTOR WITHOUT BARRIERS: PROBLEMS AND EXPERIENCE

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Summary

The article examines the features of implementing a barrier-free dialogue between veteran public organizations and civil society institutions. Special attention is paid to the features of the post-traumatic state of veterans, the features of communication with them and the conduct of socio-psychological rehabilitation. The article reveals the specifics of the need for changes in veteran policy to overcome the main obstacle – a high level of complexity and bureaucracy in this area. The authors consider the features of training and retraining veterans for employment, the features of the communicative process in this regard. The features of foreign experience in shaping the policy of socio-psychological adaptation and rehabilitation of participants in hostilities in Ukraine are considered. In addition, practical recommendations are given to representatives of public authorities for the methodology of communication with participants in hostilities, their problems after returning to civilian life are highlighted.

Key words: veterans public organizations, communication, state veterans policy, veterans education, social protection, barrier-free communication, territorial community, multi-vector policy.

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1. Introduction

The veteran sector of civil society in Ukraine is increasingly gaining social importance and influence on various socio-political processes. Sociologists note a fairly high level of trust in veterans and the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In early 2006, the Ukrainian Veterans Fund of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine presented the results of the sociological study «Portrait of a Veteran 2025», which was conducted jointly with the Sociological Group «Rating» at the end of 2025. According to this study, 96% of Ukrainians trust the military who are currently fighting, 92% – veterans of the current war, 87% – veterans of the ATO (*Portret veterana*, 2025). Also, 77% of respondents believe that society respects veterans, and the level

of respect for women veterans is 81%. At the same time, veterans themselves assess the situation more restrainedly: only 60% believe that society respects veterans. The study found that 64% of Ukrainians have veterans among their family members or close friends, which significantly affects the formation of the public image of veterans. Respondents also noted the positive influence of the media on the perception of veterans, in particular female veterans. This study demonstrates a consistently high level of trust and respect for military personnel and veterans, and also outlines the key challenges that veterans and veterans may face when returning to civilian life. But at the same time, it also prompts some reflections from representatives of public authorities – after all, against the background of high trust in the veteran environment, we see a certain decline in trust in public authorities and its institutions.

Although the authorities are currently trying to provide maximum support to veterans, there are still many problems in the veteran community (mainly, I am convinced, due to the insufficient level of awareness of officials about the methodology of working with combatants, the level of communication of those who work with veterans, their psychological preparedness, and often the shifting of responsibilities between different levels of government, as well as the level of communication. And for veterans, the main issue is still the fate of their comrades and the end of the war. This is what currently worries each of us – the citizens of Ukraine.

The purpose of the study is the communicative dialogue between public authorities and veteran sector civil society organizations to ensure service and communicative accessibility, to identify the problems of this dialogue, and to examine foreign experience in the communication between authorities and combatants. The methodological basis of the study consists of systemic, activity-based, partnership, and socio-communicative approaches. The systemic approach allows considering the interaction of state authorities, local self-government, and the veterans' sector as an integral system of social partnership. The activity-based approach is aimed at analyzing practical mechanisms for implementing veterans' policy and ensuring accessibility. The partnership approach makes it possible to investigate the peculiarities of cooperation between state institutions and public veterans' organizations, while the socio-communicative approach allows evaluating the effectiveness of dialogue among all participants in the process.

Today, during our dialogue, we need to highlight the most pressing needs of the veteran community, as well as the prospects for cooperation between the veteran civil sector and the authorities, especially with the communities where they live. A high level of trust toward military personnel and veterans is an important foundation that the state must continuously support with concrete services, post-service support, and opportunities for successful integration into civilian life. And the most important thing in the dialogue between the veteran sector and the authorities is to find an understanding of the problems and trust.

2. Research results

The main challenges identified by veterans during sociological research, as well as those I can note based on my own observations and experience working with public organizations, include psycho-emotional instability, risks of addiction, and lack of understanding from society. Among the most demanded types of support in 2025, veterans mentioned material support (50%) and medical assistance (43%), as well as the need for psychological support (28%) and housing provision (26%) (*Portret veterana*, 2025). Ukrainian society is gradually forming a realistic and balanced attitude toward veterans, recognizing their needs not only as warrior-heroes but also as citizens returning to civilian life with their own challenges and tasks. However, there is also a certain specificity in the perception of reality by veterans who have experienced

combat, suffered injuries and illnesses, and lost comrades and close friends in areas of active combat engagements.

That is, it is necessary to talk about the fact that after the return of a combatant, he needs to overcome psychological, social, and bureaucratic barriers in the community he has returned to. Nowadays, a lot is said about PTSD (combat trauma, war-exacerbated illnesses, phantom pains, «Vietnam syndrome»), so we focus on what our serviceman sometimes feels when returning from the front – the way he sees life «in peace» and in what colors it appears to him. Let us focus on how PTSD affects the perception of the surrounding world and reality – why certain barriers arise between the veteran and authorities, and between the veteran and society? After returning home from the front, the combatant – participant in hostilities (PUH) – experiences a rather complex spectrum of emotions: initially acute euphoria and relief that he is at home with family or has returned to his previous life and work.

And later, quite often, a feeling of deep alienation, depression, irritability, anxiety, and «survivor's guilt» arises-especially when you receive news about the death of your yesterday's comrades (especially younger ones or very young). This condition requires time for social adaptation, as well as considerable attention to the psychological and bureaucratic aspects of returning. The problem is that there are very few psychologists capable of properly working with combatants, and often even officials do not possess this knowledge. We have already talked about the psychological state of a combatant, but it is worth emphasizing the emotions and the special psychological aspects of this state.

The first thing that appears in a combatant is a feeling of «unreality» and negative contrast. The sharp transition from constant danger to the rear creates a sense that peaceful life exists in a parallel reality. Everyday life, entertainment, and the problems of civilians may seem trivial to a veteran, but at the same time can provoke indignation. When there are rotation issues on the front line, and in the rear we see healthy men enjoying themselves who were supposed to take up arms to defend Ukraine – this causes protest, anger, and rejection. This generates withdrawal and isolation from people – there is no desire to communicate ... due to a lack of understanding by those around him. Sometimes it irritates him when his family focuses attention on what he considers trivial everyday matters.

For most combatants, traits of hypervigilance and anxiety are characteristic for a certain period. On the front line, these traits helped to survive, but in peaceful life, for many, they seem strange. The habit of reacting to every sound persists for months. Sudden noises, the rumble of transport, or flashes of light can trigger an instinctive defense reaction and a certain fear, and later irritability (especially when it happens at work).

Quite often, frustration arises because loved ones cannot or do not want to understand the front-line experience. And there is no one to talk to because they are not very interested. Then the veteran may become withdrawn, especially feeling emotional emptiness due to the loss of comrades. Therefore, it is essential to prepare the family for the combatant's return, teach them to listen to him, understand his condition, and create conditions for adaptation – in Poltava region, there is such a regional program where a veteran and his family can undergo sanatorium-resort treatment upon returning from the combat zone. A psychologist always works with them.

Combatants often experience outbursts of anger. Emotional exhaustion leads to irritation being caused by ordinary things – queues in medical institutions, pension services, the Employment Service, social protection, shops, noise, weddings, the irresponsibility of civilians. And especially, I emphasize – queues in government institutions, healthcare facilities, behavior in transport. Here, attentive care for combatants is needed, proper work of veteran assistants,

and their support with problematic issues. And it is good when such an assistant is a combatant or a member of their family. Nowadays, quite often, such support is provided by veteran NGOs, volunteers, and so on.

Social barriers. Now, let's talk about the social barriers that practically every combatant faces—those who have actually been involved in hostilities, witnessed combat, carried out support or evacuation on the front line. These are very closely connected to their psychological state. Many veterans return to civilian life burdened with physical injuries, such as amputations, traumatic brain injuries, hearing or vision loss, and so on. They may experience mental issues related to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Stress caused by social trauma is the most common symptom of a person's experience in an extreme situation. An important mechanism to cope with it is personal resources – a set of personality traits acquired during socialization that determine the degree of a person's adaptability in specific social conditions. However, not every soldier has enough personal resources to transition out of war without pain.

Moreover, family members of combatants, going through the experiences of their relatives, can also experience secondary traumatic stress. It is important to arrange special workplaces and work schedules adapted for a person who became disabled while defending Ukraine. Physical and psychological injuries become obstacles to further employment, complicating the obtaining of well-paid jobs and leading to the necessity of living on a pension. Or, in its absence, to suffer from lack of money altogether. Often, dependence on harmful habits arises (Vorona, Hoshovska, Lopushynskyy, 2016).

Regarding socio-psychological rehabilitation. Regular sanatorium-resort treatment – as a service – has a clearly defined rehabilitative focus. Rehabilitation in this context is considered as a set of interdependent medical, social, psychological, and other measures aimed at restoring a person's social (work, professional, family, and everyday) capacity by maximally restoring the functions of their body impaired by illness. At the time of the survey, only 13.8% reported receiving medical and rehabilitation services. Local budget problems do not provide adequate opportunities to implement existing rehabilitation programs for combatants. Existing issues of social interaction with family and close people, arising from difficulties in adapting to civilian life, also need to be highlighted separately. This is especially difficult for veteran families, who cannot always adequately respond to changes occurring in people who were active participants in combat operations, and especially those who went through captivity (*Portret veterana*, 2025).

Statistics show that a third of military marriages fall apart after demobilization. A large portion of those returning home from the theater of operations have not only physical, but also deep emotional traumas, which their families do not always understand or accept. That is why, according to statistics, veterans have the lowest percentage of marriages and the highest percentage of divorces. Today, every fifth of them lives alone, and every third has ended a marriage. Here both the communities and the state itself need to lend a hand. NGOs actively help, but they are not able to identify everyone who needs this help. Communities, however, are able to, by providing social support. Although the government provides free medical treatment and rehabilitation for military personnel, their family members who want to be close to their loved ones have to pay for hotels or rent apartments if they want to support a close person and go through the difficult stages of rehabilitation together. Not all families are financially able to cover such expenses.

Therefore, the shortsightedness of government policy regarding the organization and financing of veterans' accommodation with their families during important post-traumatic rehabilitation events only worsens already complex family relationships. According to the survey,

70% of respondents noted the need for sanatorium and resort support for veterans together with their children and relatives, and 32.9% would like to have a joint psychological support program, which, as of the beginning of 2024, was provided to only 4.3% (*Portret veterana, 2025*).

I emphasize once again – the most anticipated support from the state for veterans and their families is financial support – 56.2%; strengthening health – 52.4%. Less prioritized, but no less important assistance includes housing acquisition – 29.2%; entrepreneurial investments – 27.2%; improvement of living conditions – 26.7%; education – 26.1%; employment – 24.1%; psychological support – 22.6% (*Portret veterana, 2025*).

According to survey participants, the main barriers to receiving proper support from the state for veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war are the complex bureaucratic system for obtaining benefits (79%), difficulties in arranging social payments and statuses (39.5%), as well as the lack of information about benefits and services provided by law (28.8%). Unfortunately, 59.5% of respondents point to the concealment and inaccessibility of information about the existing rights, benefits, and services for war veterans, which may indicate deliberate neglect by officials and civil servants of the social protection needs of this category, such as combatants (*Portret veterana, 2025*).

The main bureaucratic obstacles for veterans in Ukraine are an excessive amount of paperwork, delays in obtaining and verifying statuses (combatant status, disability), long queues at government institutions, as well as the bureaucratic work of VLK and MSEK commissions. Collecting certificates often turns into an exhausting process. The main barriers for veterans are: Obtaining statuses and benefits: The procedure for obtaining combatant or disability status involves long waiting times and often requires re-collecting documents due to the fragmentation of departmental databases. Collecting certificates for MSEK after injury can take months.

Outdated legislative framework: Support rules are scattered across dozens of laws and regulations, making it difficult to understand which benefits or services are guaranteed. The status of a war veteran needs to be regulated by law.

Excessive bureaucracy and queues: Veterans face queues in social protection agencies, the Pension Fund, and CNAPs, making the process of receiving financial assistance very complicated. Employment and civilian life: When looking for a job, veterans encounter biased attitudes and also face the fact that their combat experience does not always meet the requirements of the civilian labor market. To minimize bureaucratic obstacles, the state is gradually implementing the digitalization of services (for example, obtaining an e-ID through Diia) and the institution of support specialists who help veterans go through all the necessary procedures. But not all veterans are capable of doing this on their own.

The uncertainty of future prospects after the war is a fairly common problem for veterans on their path to returning to civilian life. Military personnel need to be better informed about future opportunities and prepared for the social challenges and realities of everyday civilian life.

To address all the above-mentioned issues and overcome barriers at the state level, it is important to create effective communication channels to disseminate information about the benefits and services provided by law, which should be as accessible as possible to veterans and their family members. It is also important to ensure free access to medical, psychological, and legal counseling and assistance from specialists in other related fields to optimize efforts to provide combatants and their family members with a decent life and social support. These measures will help ease adaptation and improve social integration.

Thus, the interaction of veterans with the state apparatus is complicated by a number of systemic problems:

- Lack of a single veterans' window: To obtain status, benefits, or housing, soldiers often have to go through dozens of different institutions, collect numerous certificates, and face duplication of documents.

- Problems with medical and social expertise (MSEK): Going through commissions, confirming disability, and receiving referrals for rehabilitation become a bureaucratic ordeal that exhausts people with injuries.

- Human factor and queues: Insufficient digitization of services and the formal attitude of some officials force veterans to spend time in physical queues, creating a sense of being unnecessary.

- Lack of database coordination: Military units and social protection authorities often do not have a shared electronic exchange, so veterans have to independently prove their participation in combat operations.

Excessive administrative burden at the local level complicates the return of defenders to civilian life, increasing disillusionment and distrust in the state. To better survive in conditions new to the fighter, the guys are currently uniting in public veteran organizations.

The reason for currently is that there may be other groups, as evidenced by the experience of veteran life after previous wars. There may also be criminal groups with elements of revenge and «legal justice and retribution against those whom the law does not want to see».

Public organizations play a key role in supporting veterans and their families. They help protect the rights of servicemen, provide free legal advice, assist in going through military medical commissions and receiving state-provided benefits, and also provide psychological and physical rehabilitation. For example, the activities of the public organization network «Protection of the State», where combatants can receive legal and psychological assistance, as well as appropriate support for obtaining benefits from government authorities.

Here is exactly how public initiatives and relevant ministries address the urgent needs of veterans:

- Protection of rights and legal assistance: Organizations help to solve bureaucratic issues.
- Interaction with the state: In order for the authorities to hear the needs of defenders in the regions, public organizations organize special meetings with its representatives (experience from Poltava region – meetings of veterans' public organizations with the Department of Health, the Pension Fund, the Employment Service, etc.).

- Cooperation and exchange of experience: The public sector actively cooperates with international funds, sharing experience in grant policy.

- Social adaptation and advocacy: Associations of public organizations focus on helping veterans return to civilian life. Joint meetings with representatives of organizations are held to address and discuss common issues. Joint events are held for socializing (*fishing, billiards, boccia, golf, swimming, tourism, pottery, meetings with art, writers, etc.*).

- Support network: Finding like-minded people, getting advice, or joining joint activities – returning to people who understand you. Accompanying each other with problems.

There is rich global experience of veterans' NGOs that help them survive. It is based on creating unified ecosystems of veteran support. They ensure the survival and successful adaptation of veterans through key areas such as psychological rehabilitation, employment assistance, and rights advocacy. Here is how the most effective international practices work:

- In the USA, veteran clubs that closely interact with military units are very common. They bring veterans together to share experiences, participate in joint leisure activities, and undergo rehabilitation through education and employment. This relieves stress and prevents isolation. US public organizations survive not only through government grants but also thanks

to powerful fundraising campaigns involving businesses, private donations, and the provision of paid services.

- In Canada, for example, the economic integration and employment of combatants in public organizations is actively promoted through specialized programs: programs like Hire a Veteran help employers and former military personnel adapt skills (resume writing, interview preparation), which ensures a stable income.

- Israel's special experience in involving military personnel in state governance and education. An example is Yehuda Barak (1999–2001 – Prime Minister) (*Vorona, 2010: 161-164*).

In many developed countries, veteran businesses are the foundation of survival and financial independence for military personnel. In addition, veteran organizations actively adopt international experience in socialization: in the Poltava region, the veteran organization «BAZUKA» actively works in this segment. Abroad, veteran organization often transform into Veteran Hubs, where a 'single-window' space effectively operates, allowing veterans and their families to receive psychological, legal, and everyday assistance. In all countries, veteran organization engage in advocacy and protection: they lobby at the state level for benefits, medical support, and the creation of jobs for veterans. Our senior comrades, the Chernobyl veterans, have been doing this for 40 years.

As a state policy, how does it promote the development of veteran public organization and support their growth?

State policy considers veterans' NGOs as key partners. It promotes their development by involving them in the development of the regulatory framework, providing grants through the Ukrainian Veterans Fund, and integrating them into the system of support specialists.

State institutions, in particular the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, hold consultations with the public sector to form an effective veterans' policy. Public associations influence decision-making and advocate for veterans' rights at the national level. The state provides financial support through targeted grant programs, which allows veterans' NGOs to implement projects on reintegration, sports, psychological support, and employment.

The state creates infrastructure, such as the Map of Veterans' Organizations, which helps to structure service providers. This promotes partnerships between the authorities, international donors, and the public sector.

How communities can support veterans' organizations.

- Financial support: Local governments can develop targeted local programs and allocate funds from local budgets to finance veterans' organizations. Projects (for example, holding events, legal or psychological support).

- Provision of premises: Communities can allocate communal premises to create veterans' spaces or veterans' hubs, where veterans' organizations can hold meetings, trainings and provide assistance free of charge.

- Involvement in governance: Communities can create veterans' councils under local governments, which will include veterans' organizations representatives. This allows taking into account the needs of veterans when distributing the local budget.

- Information and expert support: Communities can assist veterans' organizations. in writing grant applications for international donors, conduct training and provide informational support for their initiatives.

Social and psychological rehabilitation of combatants at the community and government levels covers a complex of interrelated areas: from individual restoration of mental health to creating conditions for full reintegration into civilian life. Local governments are developing local support programs to make this assistance systemic and targeted.

The main areas of socio-psychological rehabilitation at the community level include the following activities:

1. Psychological support and psychocorrection.

- Individual and group consultations: Work with military psychologists, psychotherapists, aimed at overcoming combat stress, anxiety, depression and prevention of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- Peer support groups: Communication with veterans who have relevant combat experience, which contributes to the acceptance of traumatic experiences and faster adaptation.

- Relaxation and resource training: Classes in art therapy, music therapy and canister therapy.

2. Social adaptation and community involvement

- Work with families: Family consultations to harmonize relationships and adapt relatives to the changing psychological state of the veteran.

- Sports and tourism rehabilitation: Involvement in veteran sports (for example, the «Invincible Games»), active tourism, group hikes, which help restore communication skills.

- National-patriotic education and mentoring: Involvement of combatants in work with youth, which returns to them a sense of significance and respect in society.

3. Professional reorientation and employment:

- Training and retraining: Programs that allow you to acquire a new profession, taking into account physical or psychological changes.

- Support for veteran businesses: Grant programs, advisory assistance in writing business plans, providing benefits for renting municipal property for veteran startups.

4. Physical and medical rehabilitation

- Physical therapy and occupational therapy: Restoration of motor activity, coordination, treatment of the consequences of injuries under the supervision of multidisciplinary teams.

- Prosthetics and adaptation of space: Provision of modern prostheses and assistance in arranging housing for the needs of the veteran.

Basic rules of etiquette (taboo):

- Do not ask unnecessary questions about combat experience if the veteran does not talk about it himself.

- Avoid empty promises. If the issue is not within the competence of the authority, it is necessary to honestly say about it and refer it to the appropriate authorities.

- Do not use professional slang or clericalisms (apply the principles of clear communication).

I would like to once again update what is necessary for the return and adaptation of a combatant.

Adaptation is not only internal work, but also interaction with society. Important steps are the registration of documents and social support (*Vorona P., 2018: 220–223*).

- Registration of UBD status. Obtaining a certificate is necessary to realize state-guaranteed benefits, such as free travel, benefits for utilities, medical care, etc.

- Medical recovery and psychological assistance. Physical injuries or latent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) require qualified support. Veterans should contact specialized rehabilitation centers for veterans, which are now operating in many communities.

- Support from peers. Communicating with those who have the same experience is one of the most effective ways of psychological relief, because they understand without words.

- Work and civilian life. Finding a new job or returning to your previous job helps to regain a sense of control over your own life and socialize in the rear. It's good, as would be training.

- Respect from society: memorializing the feat of your peers.

When communicating with a veteran, it is important to be patient, be ready to listen, but not ask about the details of the fighting against your will, and also create a safe and calm space at home (Vorona, 2018: 220–223).

When applying for civilian jobs, veterans face obstacles such as lack of education in a particular professional field, problems with their own physical health and psycho-emotional state, and salary mismatches to personal needs. Veterans face three main groups of obstacles when seeking education or retraining: psychological barriers, a gap between needs and offers of educational programs, and a lack of proper institutional support.

Many veterans face psychological and personal challenges that they often share with their peers:

Difficulty of returning to the "civilian" format: after a long stay in combat conditions, it can be difficult to adapt to prolonged academic training or sitting at a desk.

Loss of confidence and imposter syndrome: Some veterans feel anxious because their military experience is irrelevant to a civilian specialty, or worry that they have lost their study skills.

Age difference and lack of understanding: Studying in a classroom with yesterday's schoolchildren can cause discomfort, sometimes there is a lack of understanding of the specifics of the veteran's experience on the part of teachers or classmates.

Information and institutional barriers. Lack of information: According to research, a significant number of veterans (up to 68%) are not aware of existing state retraining programs or specialized courses.

Bureaucratic obstacles: Although the state is lifting a number of restrictions on the duration of vocational training and formal requirements, the integration of veterans into higher education still requires more flexible approaches to the recognition of non-formal education and taking into account health status.

Problems with labor market relevance. Inconsistency of requests: Sometimes the offered free courses or retraining programs are formulaic, outdated, or do not meet the current needs of the labor market and the ambitions of the veteran himself.

Time gap: Transitioning to a new profession takes time. Although some employers are ready to train veterans on the basis of enterprises, the process of obtaining a new qualification itself takes up valuable time when a stable income is needed.

Solutions and support. To overcome these difficulties, the state and the public sector are creating specialized initiatives. The goal is to provide support for veterans, flexible schedules, and short-term internships with subsequent employment (Vorona, 2018: 220–223).

3. Conclusion

Coordination of community and government efforts is very important in supporting veterans. Effective veteran policy is implemented through the creation of multilateral platforms. Local councils create Veteran Spaces (or «veteran development centers»), where administrative, legal and primary psychological assistance is provided on a «one-stop» basis. Communities also attract grant funds to support public organizations specializing in the psychological recovery of defenders. The state and local governments finance basic services (for example, rehabilitation packages under the National Health Service program), but it is local initiatives that make this process comprehensive, including measures to develop veteran policy. A veteran's assistant is a positive experience, but there is a question – who should be there and should

he or she work closely with veterans' NGOs. Currently, the law does not provide for the recruitment of mainly veterans to these positions.

And the main thing – how to communicate with veterans? What should be the communication model?

An effective model of communication between a government official and a combat veteran (CVD) is based on the principles of respect, empathy, openness and clarity. It requires adherence to an algorithm that helps relieve psychological tension and direct the dialogue in a constructive direction to resolve specific issues.

The optimal interaction model includes the following stages:

- Preparation and setup: Before receiving, it is important to familiarize yourself with the applicant's problem, show respect for his status and avoid any manifestations of superiority. Communication should take place in the format of an equal dialogue.
- Active listening and empathy: The government official should listen to the veteran without interrupting, demonstrating interest. It is important to take into account possible post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or fatigue, so the tone of the conversation should be calm and balanced.
- Definition of legal boundaries and opportunities: Explain clearly, transparently and without bureaucratic wording what benefits, guarantees or services are provided by the legislation.
- Development of an action algorithm: Together with the DB participant, draw up a step-by-step plan for solving the problem (what documents are needed, where to contact, what are the terms of consideration).
- Feedback: Make sure that the veteran correctly understood the procedure, and also provide the contacts of the responsible person for prompt communication and monitoring of the result, which is key in building a system of trust in the authorities.

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