BEYOND GUNS, PROTOCOLS, AND CLASSROOMS: REFRAMING NIGERIA'S NATIONAL INTEREST THROUGH ECONOMIC, EDUCATIONAL, IDEOLOGICAL, AND PATRIOTIC LENSES

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Abstract

This research interrogates the persistent dominance of military and diplomatic paradigms in the articulation of Nigeria's national interest. While national interest is conceptually multidimensional encompassing security, economic development, ideological coherence, territorial integrity, and patriotic identity Nigeria's post-independence statecraft has remained narrowly securitized and diplomatically elite-driven. Education, despite its role in civic mobilization, national integration, and global influence, has been largely sidelined. Grounded in Realist, Liberal, and Constructivist theories, this research applies thematic analysis to explore the ideological and structural underpinnings of this imbalance. It shows how decades of military rule and post-1999 political continuity has entrenched a top-down approach that neglects developmental, educational, and civic dimensions. Through case studies like Nigeria's peacekeeping efforts, Bakassi Peninsula negotiations, Boko Haram insurgency, and the crisis of national civic identity, the study exposes the cost of excluding education from strategic planning. The study concludes by proposing a comprehensive redefinition of national interest one that integrates education, economic policy, ideological development, and patriotic unity as essential to Nigeria's national renewal, social cohesion, and sustained international relevance.

Keywords: Military, Diplomatic, National interest, Economic, Education, Ideology, Patriotic.

Introduction

1.1 Understanding National Interest

The concept of national interest is foundational to foreign policy and statecraft. Traditionally defined as the goals and ambitions a state seeks to achieve in the international arena, national interest is often articulated in terms of security, economic prosperity, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and influence (Morgenthau, 1948). However, it is not a static concept. The interpretation of national interest is profoundly shaped by a country's internal politics, historical evolution, geopolitical position, and ideological outlook (Hill, 2003). In realist theory, national interest is predominantly security-oriented and power-centric, driven by survival in an anarchic international system. Conversely, liberal and constructivist perspectives

argue that identity, ideology, economic cooperation, and moral norms are equally valid expressions of national interest (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Wendt, 1999).

1.2 Nigeria's Paradox: A Security-Diplomacy Monopoly

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria's articulation of national interest has been heavily dominated by military and diplomatic constructs, often sidelining economic development, territorial integration, emotional-national cohesion, and ideological consistency. This orientation has persisted through military regimes (1966–1999) and civilian administrations alike, manifesting in interventionist foreign policy (e.g., ECOMOG missions), peacekeeping hegemony in West Africa, and a reactive diplomacy aimed at regime legitimacy more than societal advancement (Amao, 2021; Ogunnubi et al., 2017).

Despite being the largest economy in Africa and one of its most diverse nations, economic diplomacy, national ideology, and patriotic mobilization have not featured prominently in Nigeria's national interest calculus. Instead, the military's historical grip on the state and a legacy of personalized elite diplomacy have rendered national interest a top-down, securitized narrative, largely removed from popular or developmental concerns (Adogamhe, 2024; Folarin, 2024). The omission of education both as a civic institution and ideological engine has deprived Nigeria of a vital tool for consolidating national identity and transmitting shared values. Education is not only developmental; it is political and symbolic, shaping the very consciousness of national interest (Adesina, 2021; Odukoya, 2019).

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to National Interest in Theory

The concept of national interest has been a pillar of international relations and foreign policy analysis. It refers to the goals and ambitions of a state in both domestic and international contexts. These goals include security, economic prosperity, ideological projection, and territorial integrity. However, how states define and pursue these goals varies significantly depending on theoretical perspectives.

2.2 Realism and the Security-Diplomacy Dominance

Realism posits that states are the primary actors in an anarchic international system, and survival, power, and security are the core of their national interest (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). From this viewpoint, the military and diplomatic focus of Nigeria's national interest is predictable.

Realist scholarship treats the militarization of national interest as a rational response to insecurity and regional threats. In Nigeria's case, realist logic underpins:

Nigeria's role in peacekeeping missions (ECOMOG).

Its quest for regional dominance in West Africa.

Its reactive foreign policy to threats like Boko Haram and the Bakassi Peninsula dispute.

Nwafor, (2025)

As **Adogamhe (2024)** notes, Nigerian foreign policy has long been driven by the need to project power, protect sovereignty, and counter internal instability, especially during the military era.

2.3 Liberalism and the Case for Economic and Institutional Interests

Liberal internationalism challenges realism by emphasizing:

Interdependence and cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1977),

Economic diplomacy, and

Democratic accountability in defining national interest.

Liberal theorists argue that Nigeria's overemphasis on military responses neglects its potential for regional economic leadership. Scholars like Oshewolo & Fayomi (2020) contend that Nigeria has failed to pursue sustained economic diplomacy, despite its size and oil wealth.

In the liberal tradition, Nigeria's national interest should also focus on:

Promoting regional economic integration (e.g., ECOWAS).

Leveraging trade and soft power.

Institutional reforms that make foreign policy reflect popular interests.

However, Hill (2003) suggests that domestic political fragmentation and elite dominance often hinder liberal-oriented foreign policy.

2.4 Constructivism and the Role of Ideology, Identity, and Patriotism

Constructivist theory sees national interest as socially constructed, evolving with identity, ideas, and discourse (Wendt, 1999). This view is crucial in understanding why Nigeria lacks a clear ideological or patriotic underpinning in its foreign or domestic policies.

Constructivist scholars like Folarin (2024) show that Nigeria's national identity remains weak, fragmented by ethnicity, religion, and class. Therefore, the emotional and ideological content of national interest is underdeveloped, leaving space for military and diplomatic elites to dominate narratives.

Harnischfeger (2018), writing on Biafra and secessionism, shows how the absence of inclusive national ideology has led to widespread disaffection, undermining unity and soft power. Ottuh (2025) goes further to propose that Nigeria must adopt a civic-republican ideological orientation to strengthen internal coherence and redefine national interest beyond physical security.

2.5 Education and National Interest: Civic Identity and Soft Power

Although traditional international relations theories focus on power and institutions, recent literature emphasizes the strategic relevance of education in shaping national identity, civic consciousness, and international influence. Scholars like Adesina (2021), Odukoya (2019), and Akinyemi (2017) argue that education serves as a long-term mechanism for ideological consolidation, state legitimacy, and soft power diplomacy.

Nwafor, (2025)

From a constructivist standpoint, education is instrumental in constructing shared narratives, national ideology, and political culture. In Nigeria, the failure to embed civic education and national values into the educational curriculum has been linked to growing regionalism, secessionist sentiment, and the erosion of civic attachment (Olaniyan & Akinyemi, 2020). Furthermore, the absence of structured educational diplomacy through African university partnerships, scholarships, and cultural exchanges limits Nigeria's influence across the continent. This emerging literature demands a broader view of national interest, where education is not just a sectoral concern but a geopolitical and ideological strategy.

2.6 Empirical Studies on Nigeria's National Interest Orientation

A number of scholars have focused specifically on how Nigeria defines and operationalizes its national interest:

Amao (2021) argues that Nigeria's interventionist foreign policy is more about elite legitimacy than national cohesion. Ogunnubi et al. (2017) document how Boko Haram exposed the limits of a militarized conception of national interest, as domestic insecurity reduced diplomatic clout. Adigbuo (2019) illustrates Nigeria's territorial concessions in Bakassi as a soft diplomatic failure and national interest compromise. Sule (2024) shows how political parties and institutions have neglected ideological and developmental national interest formation in favor of electoral expediency. Shaibu & Nwadialor (2025) provide empirical evidence from Northern Nigeria showing how civic education delivered through religious and communal institutions enhances national integration, reduces extremist appeal, and strengthens civic allegiance. Their study reinforces the case for positioning education as a strategic pillar of national interest.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, conceptual methodology rooted in interpretive political analysis and documentary review. Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork or statistical modeling, the study draws from academic literature, government documents, policy statements, and historical case studies to explore how Nigeria has historically conceptualized its national interest. This approach is appropriate given the study's focus on ideational constructs such as ideology, patriotism, and identity, which require thematic and narrative interpretation rather than quantifiable data.

Data were sourced from peer-reviewed journals, books, international relations theory texts, and official Nigerian government publications accessed via academic databases like Springer, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, and ScienceDirect. The analysis is structured thematically around five dimensions of national interest: military, diplomatic, economic, ideological, and patriotic/emotional. The research utilizes theoretical triangulation primarily Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism to critically interpret how these dimensions have been emphasized or neglected in Nigerian policy. While this method does not allow for generalizable findings, it provides deep conceptual insight into the evolving (and often imbalanced) priorities that shape Nigeria's statecraft.

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Analysis Dissecting Nigeria's National Interest

4.1 Introduction

This chapter applies leading theories of international relations Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism to analyze the evolution and orientation of Nigeria's national interest. The analysis is structured around five thematic dimensions: military, diplomatic, economic, ideological, and patriotic/emotional. It reveals a clear hierarchy of priorities, with military and diplomatic paradigms dominating while economic, ideological, and emotional dimensions remain subordinate, fragmented, or absent.

4.2 Military Perspective: National Interest as Security and Coercion

Nigeria's post-independence era was shaped by civil war, military coups, and regional instability, embedding a securitized definition of national interest rooted in Realist theory (Waltz, 1979). During the Babangida and Abacha regimes, national security was narrowly conceived in regime survival terms (Folarin, 2024). Nigeria's military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone (ECOMOG) were framed as preserving regional stability, but also served as instruments of projecting hegemonic power (Amao, 2021). The failure to defeat Boko Haram and reclaim lost territories weakened both internal legitimacy and regional standing (Ogunnubi et al., 2017). While Realism validates security concerns, Nigeria's military obsession has often displaced other components of state-building and development.

4.3 Diplomatic Perspective: National Interest as Prestige and Influence

Nigeria's diplomatic efforts have focused on continental leadership, multilateral engagement, and non-alignment, reflecting a hybrid of Realist power projection and Liberal institutionalism. Nigeria's active roles in the African Union, ECOWAS, and UN peacekeeping reflect its desire to lead Africa diplomatically. However, Adogamhe (2024) notes that Nigeria's diplomacy often lacks ideological clarity or grassroots legitimacy it is elite-driven and inconsistent. The Bakassi Peninsula handover to Cameroon illustrates how diplomatic pragmatism sometimes overrides territorial or patriotic sentiments (Adigbuo, 2019). Diplomacy is pursued as a source of international prestige, yet without sufficient integration of economic interests or public participation in defining national goals.

4.4 Economic Perspective: National Interest as Development and Prosperity (Marginalized)

Despite being Africa's largest economy, Nigeria has failed to construct an economically driven national interest strategy, revealing a contradiction within liberalist expectations. Oshewolo & Fayomi (2020) argue that economic diplomacy in Nigeria is reactive, fragmented, and overshadowed by military commitments. Foreign policy lacks focus on trade negotiations, FDI strategy, or industrial growth, despite enormous potential. Oil dependence has created a mono-economic structure that narrows national ambition to resource rent extraction, not structural

transformation. A robust economic vision of national interest is absent due to elite capture, policy inconsistency, and weak institutional coordination.

4.5 Ideological Perspective: National Interest as Identity and Vision (Underdeveloped)

From a constructivist lens, national interest should reflect a country's collective identity, ideological orientation, and normative aspirations (Wendt, 1999). In Nigeria, this dimension remains under-articulated and fragmented. Harnischfeger (2018) shows that the post-Biafra state failed to establish a unifying national ideology, leaving deep ethnic cleavages unresolved. Ottuh (2025) argues for a return to civic nationalism, suggesting that Nigeria's fragmented identity undermines efforts to consolidate national interest. There is no enduring ideological legacy akin to Tanzania's Ujamaa or Ghana's Pan-African socialism. The absence of an ideological anchor contributes to policy inconsistency, identity crisis, and public disengagement from national goals.

4.6 Patriotic and Emotional Perspective: National Interest as Belonging and Cohesion (Neglected)

A well-defined national interest should resonate emotionally with citizens, generating collective will and civic commitment. Nigeria's statecraft has largely failed to cultivate this. Rotational presidency and federal character principles aim at inclusion but often mask deeper fractures (Faluyi, 2024). The state has not successfully built national narratives around shared sacrifice, unity, or destiny. Instead, ethnic and religious identities dominate (Sule, 2024). Military regimes contributed to a top-down definition of patriotism obedience without emotional belonging or civic participation. The emotional neglect of the national interest has weakened national unity, fed secessionist discourse, and limited Nigeria's soft power.

4.7 Education Perspective: National Interest as Human Capital and Civic Identity (Neglected)

While largely unaddressed in dominant national security discourse, education serves as a fundamental pillar of national interest. Civic education, national ideology, and intellectual soft power all emerge through a deliberate educational strategy. The failure to embed education in Nigeria's national interest architecture has led to civic disengagement, weak ideological cohesion, and vulnerability to populism and radicalization (Olaniyan & Akinyemi, 2020).

As Odukoya (2019) asserts, "national unity begins in the classroom," yet Nigeria's fragmented educational content often reinforces ethno-regional divisions. The absence of patriotic curricula, ideological civics, and integrated national history has limited youth attachment to the Nigerian state. Constructivist insights demand that education be seen not just as a sector but as an arena for identity production. Educational diplomacy scholarships, academic exchanges, Pan-African university partnerships is also underleveraged, despite its effectiveness as a soft power strategy (Akinyemi, 2017). To realize its national interest, Nigeria must treat education not merely as policy, but as ideology.

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4.8 Synthesis: A Narrow and Imbalanced National Interest

Across all dimensions, the evidence shows that Nigeria's conception of national interest is:

Realist-heavy: focused on security and regime preservation.

Diplomatically elite: with minimal public accountability or ideological clarity.

Economically thin: reactive rather than strategic.

Ideologically hollow: lacking an integrative identity project.

Emotionally distant: failing to inspire collective belonging.

Educationally neglected: ignoring the role of civic education, curriculum development, and human capital formation in shaping national cohesion and strategic vision.

Consequences and Implications

5.1 Introduction

A state's conception of its national interest is not a rhetorical exercise it profoundly shapes domestic governance, foreign policy behavior, public trust, national cohesion, and developmental outcomes. In Nigeria's case, the overreliance on military and diplomatic perspectives to define and pursue national interest has produced significant negative consequences, while failing to harness alternative sources of national power and identity.

5.2 Political Consequences: Authoritarian Legacy and Elite Capture

The military-centric conception of national interest fostered an environment where:

Security was equated with regime survival, not citizen well-being (Folarin, 2024). National interest became top-down and elite-defined, marginalizing the populace in decision-making processes (Adogamhe, 2024). Civilian administrations, even post-1999, inherited and replicated the military-political logic of governance prioritizing diplomatic image-building and hard security over social or ideological consolidation. This led to elite capture of foreign policy, where strategic interests were decoupled from developmental priorities or public accountability.

5.3 Developmental Implications: Weak Economic Statecraft

Nigeria's neglect of economic diplomacy and structural transformation has had severe repercussions:

Despite Africa's largest economy, Nigeria has failed to leverage its economic capacity for international influence or regional integration (Oshewolo & Fayomi, 2020). Over-dependence on crude oil has left Nigeria vulnerable to global price shocks, without a diversified foreign policy toolkit (Hill, 2003). Absence of strategic economic diplomacy has undermined Nigeria's standing in platforms like AfCFTA and WTO negotiations. The result is a national interest that is externally expressive (diplomatic) but internally hollow (economically disconnected).

5.4 National Identity Crisis and Fragmented Patriotism

Educational neglect manifests in fragmented civic identity and a lack of emotional attachment to the state. The weak penetration of civic education, national history, and ideological instruction in schools allows subnational narratives to flourish unchecked (Adesina, 2021; Odukoya, 2019). Consequently, youth alienation, disinformation, and secessionist appeals find fertile ground in educational gaps. Constructivist scholars emphasize that national interest must reflect a shared identity and civic emotion. Nigeria's failure to define national interest in patriotic or ideological terms has produced:

Ethnic fragmentation, where subnational identities override allegiance to the state (Harnischfeger, 2018). Low trust in national institutions, as citizens often view state action as ethnically or regionally motivated (Sule, 2024). Absence of unifying national narratives, leading to popular disengagement, secessionist movements, and a weak sense of civic duty (Faluyi, 2024). Rather than invoking belonging, the Nigerian state often governs through enforcement, not emotional or ideological connection.

5.5 Eroded Diplomatic Credibility and Strategic Confusion

Ironically, even Nigeria's diplomatic strength has been undermined by the incoherence in its national interest formulation: Regional partners often distrust Nigeria's motives, viewing it as a hegemon rather than a collaborator (Amao, 2021). Incidents like the Bakassi Peninsula handover show Nigeria compromising on territorial integrity without clear internal consensus (Adigbuo, 2019). The inability to defeat Boko Haram has diminished Nigeria's soft power and military credibility, despite its peacekeeping legacy (Ogunnubi et al., 2017). A lack of internal unity, weak ideological base, and reactive economic policy limit Nigeria's ability to project a coherent and stable foreign policy identity.

5.6 Inhibited National Development

Ultimately, the fragmented and narrow conception of national interest contributes to:

Policy inconsistency across regimes,

Weak national cohesion and civic commitment,

Limited global influence relative to its size and potential and

Underdeveloped economic sovereignty and regional integration.

In the absence of a unified ideological project, strategic economic vision, and broad-based patriotic engagement, Nigeria's developmental trajectory remains constrained by old paradigms.

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Table 5.1 Summary of Implications

Consequence	Description
Authoritarian Legacy	Military logic embedded in civilian governance
Economic Underperformance	Weak economic diplomacy, oil dependency
Identity Fragmentation	Ethnic/religious divisions weaken patriotic engagement
Diplomatic Trust Deficit	Neighbours view Nigeria as hegemonic, not collaborative
Strategic Incoherence	No consistent national interest across regimes
Developmental Constraints	Lack of ideological drive impedes reform and innovation
Civic Erosion through Educational Neglect	Absence of patriotic education and civic curriculum weakens ideological unity and national belonging

Source: Researcher's compilation, 2025

Recommendations: Reframing Nigeria's National Interest

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters established that Nigeria's national interest has been overly securitized and diplomatically elite-driven, to the detriment of economic development, ideological unity, territorial integrity, and emotional-patriotic cohesion. This chapter proposes a reorientation of national interest that is comprehensive, inclusive, and development-oriented, grounded in theoretical insights and practical needs.

6.2 Toward a Holistic National Interest Framework

To align national interest with Nigeria's developmental and identity-based realities, the state must adopt a multi-dimensional model that integrates six critical domains:

Table 6.1 The six critical domains

Domain	Strategic Focus
Security	Territorial integrity, counter-insurgency, and internal stability
Diplomacy	Regional cooperation, multilateral engagement, image building
Economy	Trade diplomacy, industrial policy, economic regionalism (AfCFTA, ECOWAS)
Ideology	Nation-building values, civic republicanism, African solidarity
Patriotism	Inclusive national narratives, cultural diplomacy, civic education
Education	Civic literacy, ideological formation, human capital development, and educational diplomacy

Source: Researcher's compilation, 2025

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6.3 Policy Recommendations by Sector

6.3.1 Rebalancing Security with Development

Adopt a human security framework, prioritizing healthcare, education, and food security alongside counter-insurgency. Limit military centrality in national planning; civilian institutions should define and implement broader national interests.

6.3.2 Institutionalize Strategic Economic Diplomacy

Create an Economic Diplomacy Council under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to integrate trade, finance, and industry in foreign policy. Leverage ECOWAS and AfCFTA for regional industrial corridors, beyond commodity exports.

6.3.3   Construct an Ideological and Civic Foundation

Develop a National Ideology Charter, drawing from pan-Africanism, civic republicanism, and indigenous political traditions.

Institutionalize civic education reforms from primary to tertiary levels to build national consciousness.

6.3.4 Reclaim and Integrate Emotional/Patriotic Symbols

Reframe state symbols (anthem, coat of arms, public holidays) as tools of emotional unity, not bureaucratic tokens. Launch a "One Nigeria" Cultural Diplomacy Initiative, promoting unity through film, literature, and sport.

6.3.5 Democratize Foreign Policy and National Interest Formation

Create public channels (citizen assemblies, consultations) for debating and defining national interest priorities. Mandate parliamentary review of foreign policy strategies, integrating economic and ideological benchmarks.

6.3.6 Reposition Education as Civic Infrastructure and Diplomatic Asset

Integrate compulsory civic-national education from primary through tertiary levels to cultivate a sense of belonging, historical awareness, and national purpose. Invest in education diplomacy by creating African-wide scholarship programs, pan-African language initiatives, and academic consulates. Revise the NYSC orientation to emphasize shared civic values and economic innovation, not just geographical rotation. Establish an "Education and National Values Commission" to unify curriculum standards around patriotism, democracy, and responsible citizenship.

6.4 Long-Term Strategic Shifts

From Regime-Centric to Citizen-Centric Interest: De-elitize foreign and national policy to reflect bottom-up inputs.

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From Security First to Development First: Embed long-term development goals into all national security strategies.

From External Prestige to Internal Consolidation: Prioritize domestic legitimacy and civic cohesion over international images.

6.5 Evaluation Metrics for Success

To track the progress of a broadened national interest framework, the following indicators may be adopted:

Increased FDI in non-oil sectors (economic diplomacy).

Civic engagement scores in national identity surveys.

Youth participation in policy platforms.

Reduction in regional and ethnic identity conflicts.

Improved performance in regional trade and industrial linkages.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Nigeria's National Interest for the 21st Century
7.1 Restating the Core Argument

This research has critically examined the paradox that, despite Nigeria's complex socio-economic landscape and strategic global position, its national interest has remained narrowly defined through military and diplomatic lenses. Through a multidisciplinary and theory-informed analysis, the study demonstrated that this securitized approach rooted in Nigeria's history of authoritarian rule and regional hegemonic ambition has overshadowed more holistic dimensions of national interest, including economic prosperity, ideological coherence, territorial integration, and patriotic inclusion.

7.2 Theoretical Contribution

Drawing from Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, the research revealed:

Realist theory explains Nigeria's prioritization of power and security, particularly through military interventions and diplomatic posturing.

Liberal theory exposes the underutilization of economic diplomacy and institutional engagement with regional trade and governance platforms.

Constructivist insights highlight Nigeria's fragmented identity, weak ideological foundations, and absence of an emotionally resonant national project.

Together, these frameworks underscore that Nigeria's national interest has been strategically reactive, institutionally thin, and emotionally disengaged.

7.3 Empirical and Policy Implications

The consequences of this narrow conception are far-reaching:

Domestically, it has reinforced elite-driven governance, inhibited development, and weakened national unity.

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Regionally, it has eroded trust and limited Nigeria's ability to lead through cooperation rather than dominance.

Globally, it has prevented Nigeria from converting its demographic and economic potential into sustained influence.

To remain relevant in a changing international order, Nigeria must move from a militarized-regime-centric logic to a development-focused, people-centered, and identity-rich understanding of national interest.

7.4 Roadmap for Reformation

The recommendations offered in Chapter 6 provide a practical foundation for reform. A national interest strategy that integrates:

Economic transformation,

Cultural and ideological consolidation,

Civic education and patriotic mobilization,

And participatory diplomacy is not only desirable but necessary.

This transformation will require political will, intellectual leadership, and inclusive statecraft beginning with the democratization of how national interest is conceptualized and pursued.

7.5 Final Reflection

The task before Nigeria is not merely to "defend national interest" in the abstract, but to define it comprehensively, negotiate it inclusively, and pursue it holistically. Only through such an integrative framework can national interest evolve from a narrow tool of statecraft into a genuine platform for national development and cohesion. In redefining what matters most, Nigeria will not only protect its sovereignty it will finally realize it.

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