



*US tactical nuclear weapons at Kleine Brogel in  
the context of contemporary international  
developments*

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**Background Note**

22 September 2010

## COLOPHON

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### Print

Flemish Parliament Printing Office

Brussels, 22 September 2010

ISBN 9789078864400

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## Summary

*On 24 February 2010 the Flemish Parliament adopted a resolution on a nuclear-free world. It called on the Flemish Government to urge the Belgian Federal Government to advocate, in NATO, the abolishment of all nuclear weapons worldwide, thereby including those deployed in Flanders. In response to a question from the Committee for Foreign Policy, European Affairs and International Cooperation of the Flemish Parliament<sup>I</sup>, the present Background Note was prepared to provide an overview of recent international developments in nuclear policy and strategy.<sup>II</sup>*

*After a brief outline of the local political and social context, the Note explains the presence of US nuclear weapons in Belgium from a historic perspective. It also discusses recent developments in efforts to bring about nuclear disarmament and highlights their relevance for the discussion in Flanders. We discuss the new US and NATO nuclear strategies, the New START Treaty between the United States and Russia, the debate within NATO and the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conferences. These developments constitute the international framework for the debate on the deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe.*

*In an international context, the efforts for meaningful steps towards nuclear disarmament have intensified, which may offer the prospect of a nuclear-free Europe, an objective that receives considerable political and social support in Flanders. However, it is uncertain whether the momentum for nuclear disarmament within NATO and at the international level will be used to remove all the US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. At present their symbolic function for the trans-Atlantic relationship appears to be greater than the symbolic value their withdrawal may have for worldwide non-proliferation initiatives. Maintaining tactical nuclear weapons in Europe would nonetheless have a significant practical impact: economically, because major financial investments must be made to modernise the bombs and enhance their secure storage; and politically, because this would dissipate the effect of the non-proliferation standards that the United States and Europe wish to impose on other countries.*

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I The question was asked in a letter dated 11 May as a follow-up to the resolution adopted by the plenary of the Flemish Parliament on 24 February 2010 concerning a world free of nuclear arms (Parl. Doc. Fl.. Parl. 2009-2010, no. 388/2). The present Note was drawn up in preparation for a discussion on this subject in the Committee for Foreign Policy, European Affairs and International Cooperation.

II The present Note is an update of the contents of the Note entitled 'Strategic developments as regards Belgium's remaining core task', which was presented by Prof. Dr. Rik Coolsaet to the Committee on Nuclear Disarmament of the Senate on 2 March 2010.

# 1 Introduction

On 24 February 2010 the Flemish Parliament adopted a resolution<sup>1</sup> calling for a worldwide ban on nuclear weapons. It also refers specifically to the US nuclear weapons deployed on Flemish soil. The Flemish Parliament called on the Flemish Government to urge the Belgian Federal Government to strongly advocate within the NATO Alliance the removal of these nuclear bombs.

Parliamentary initiatives have been launched in the past, at regional and federal level, to remove these nuclear weapons from Flanders. In 1995 the first resolution<sup>2</sup> on diplomatic initiatives to abolish nuclear weapons was submitted in the Belgian Federal Chamber of Representatives (the lower house of Parliament), but this resolution was rejected and in 1998 the Flemish Parliament rejected a resolution<sup>3</sup> on this subject. In early 2000, however, the Flemish Parliament approved by a large majority the first resolution on the presence of nuclear weapons on Flemish soil,<sup>4</sup> and in 2005 the Chamber for the first time passed a resolution calling for their withdrawal.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe is not only denounced by politicians. After the success of the peace movement's protests against the stationing of cruise missiles at the Florennes Air Base in the 1980s, peace movements agitating against the nuclear bombs deployed at the airforce base in Kleine Brogel have taken up this cause from the mid-1990s. These movements organise campaigns nearly every year, usually as 'citizens inspections'.

According to a survey of 1000 people carried out by the Flemish Peace Institute in 2007, two out of three Flemish respondents (67%) oppose the deployment of nuclear weapons on Belgian soil. There is widespread support for the political initiatives urging nuclear disarmament and for the many 'bomb spotting' activities of peace movements in and around Kleine Brogel.<sup>6</sup> This also applies at the local level: 240 mayors of Flemish towns and municipalities are affiliated with the *Mayors for Peace* international network,<sup>7</sup> founded in 1982 by the then Mayor of the City of Hiroshima and today with members from more than 4,000 cities worldwide, united for the cause of nuclear disarmament. *Mayors for Peace* launched the 'Hiroshima-Nagasaki Protocol' in 2008 to call on countries throughout the world to take definitive steps to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world by 2020. In its Memorandum for the 2009 Flemish elections, the Flemish Peace Institute called on the Flemish Government to sign the Hiroshima-Nagasaki Protocol as a powerful bottom-up effort in support of a nuclear-free world.

This Background Note sketches the background to the presence of the contested nuclear weapons from a historic perspective. We then discuss their role in the light of the new political climate in which the use of nuclear weapons is increasingly questioned and describe recent international developments in nuclear disarmament. Finally, we examine the extent to which international developments influence the debate on the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe.

## 2 *From a deterrent to a symbol of trans-Atlantic cohesion*

### 2.1

#### Nuclear cooperation during the cold war

In the 1950s the United States began to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of European NATO member states in the framework of “nuclear sharing” arrangements. Under these arrangements the European states could be given wartime permission to use some of the US-owned and –controlled nuclear bombs stored at US bases in these countries. They are *tactical* (or *non-strategic*) nuclear weapons – that is, small, short-range weapons. Tactical nuclear weapons are used in the battlefield to destroy enemy tactical and operational targets.<sup>8</sup>

The nuclear weapons deployed in Flanders are B61 gravity bombs, stored at the Kleine Brogel base in northern Limburg. Although these weapons remain under US command and control during peacetime, they can be delivered by the national air force of the host country in times of war.<sup>9</sup> Belgian fighter aircraft (F-16s) can then serve as the carriers. These dual-capable aircraft (can carry nuclear and conventional bombs) have a limited operational range (c. 1,350 km) and are on extremely low-level alert for their nuclear missions.<sup>10</sup>

NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements were established during the cold war to counteract the perceived conventional military superiority of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>11</sup> US nuclear weapons in Europe continued to be deemed necessary in a deterrent function. It was considered an advantage that, because the NATO allies were protected under the United States’ nuclear umbrella, the presence of US nuclear weapons dissuaded them from developing their own nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2

### Waning military interest after the cold war

After the end of the cold war US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe lost their military usefulness: they are no longer relevant in a deterrent function, partly because of their limited range but also because of NATO's membership enlargement, encompassing countries to the east. In order for these tactical weapons to be at all useful they would have to be moved eastwards to the territory of the East and Central European NATO member states (to deter Russia) and to the Balkan region (to deter states in the Middle East). Given the current geopolitical circumstances, however, both scenarios are highly unlikely.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, all potential targets covered by the bombs in Europe are also within reach of the strategic nuclear missiles based in the United States.<sup>14</sup> The US military organisation responsible for nuclear weapons in Europe confirms that the US tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe have no essential military value.<sup>15</sup>

Should European NATO member states face a direct threat, it is far from certain that the United States would resort to the use of nuclear weapons. In contrast with the (perceived) conventional military inferiority of NATO during the cold war, current US and NATO conventional forces surpass those of any other country or bloc in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, nuclear weapons have a very limited deterrent effect on the main threat today – terrorist groups, which have no permanent base to strike.<sup>17</sup> If a state should be attacked by terrorists, it would not know where to launch a nuclear counterattack. Terrorist groups are difficult to locate. One of the current dangers associated with the deployment of nuclear weapons is that this entails a risk of theft by terrorist groups: because of their smaller size, tactical nuclear weapons are easier to steal than their strategic counterparts. In addition, in recent years it has become obvious that most European bases where US nuclear weapons are stored do not meet the required security standards.<sup>18</sup> The US Air Force has in fact stated that a significant investment is required to strengthen security around the bases.<sup>19</sup> Concerns about the security of these depots are not misplaced, as demonstrated in late January 2010, when peace activists succeeded in invading the Kleine Brogel Air Base.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.3

### Political and symbolic function

US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are nevertheless still deemed to have a political and symbolic role to play in NATO's security policy. The 1999 NATO Strategic Concept outlines the Alliance's approach to the most important threats and challenges to NATO and describes the role of these nuclear weapons as 'political': to deter potential enemies and preserve peace.<sup>21</sup> The nuclear sharing arrangements symbolise trans-Atlantic cohesion and solidarity within the Alliance. Any US initiative to withdraw nuclear weapons from Europe would be seen by the European allies as signalling a weaker commitment to Europe.

Within NATO the new East and Central European member states are especially keen to maintain US tactical weapons in Europe. Nuclear sharing constitutes a (symbolic) guarantee for the former Soviet satellite states that the United States will protect them against any threat from Russia. The US 'nuclear umbrella' was one of the main reasons why they joined NATO in the first place.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.4

### Financial implications

The presence of US nuclear weapons outside the United States has financial consequences for the countries where they are deployed. In addition to the expense associated with the maintenance and security of nuclear weapon storage facilities, keeping US bombs on Belgian soil will entail significant additional costs in the medium term.<sup>23</sup> In contrast with the life extension of the B61 bombs, which the United States will finance, the upgrading or replacement of the F-16 fighter aircraft stationed in Belgium has to be financed by the Belgian state. The 12 F-16s have already received a considerable Mid-Life Update.<sup>24</sup> The Life Extension Program allows Belgium to continue to perform its NATO nuclear task until about 2020,<sup>25</sup> but then additional investments will be required – and such investments are controversial given the limited military role of these weapons, the lack of transparency and the pressure generally on defence budgets.<sup>26</sup>

A number of Belgian Federal MPs pointed this out in September 2009. In a letter addressed to the US Congress they characterised the further deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons in Belgium as 'a waste of resources for the U.S. and Belgian Air Force respectively' and argued that there is a 'political consensus that it is best to end their deployment'.<sup>27</sup>



## 3 Recent developments at international diplomatic level

The international climate has become more amenable to the idea of nuclear disarmament. In the opinion editorials of many leading newspapers, prominent political leaders have pressed for the abolition of nuclear weapons. An early such op-ed was published in January 2007 by former US Secretaries of State George Schultz and Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of Defence William Perry, and former US Senator Sam Nunn in *The Wall Street Journal*. Similar statements have recently been published in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands and Poland.<sup>28</sup> Four Belgian Ministers of State have also recently published an op-ed<sup>29</sup> advocating a nuclear-free world.

In late 2008 Ivo Daalder and Jan Lodal published a notable article in the influential US journal *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>30</sup> They argued that the United States should take the lead in bringing about nuclear disarmament, that the role of nuclear weapons in US military strategy should be curtailed, and that the United States should drastically reduce its nuclear arsenal. They pointed out that Russia's nuclear arsenal no longer poses the greatest threat to humanity; the increasing numbers of nuclear arms in the world, however, do. According to these authors, all states would benefit from a world without nuclear weapons. If governments limited the role of nuclear weapons to the deterrence of the use of nuclear weapons by others, then the security of these states would be enhanced. Concomitantly, the perceived strategic value of these nuclear weapons would have been drastically curtailed.

### 3.1 The United States' nuclear strategy

In a speech he held in Prague in April 2009 US President Barack Obama announced clear US commitments to pursue a world without nuclear weapons. He called on states to 'pursue peace and safety in a world without nuclear weapons'. A year later, on 6 April 2010, the most recent US *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), a policy document that sets out the United States' nuclear strategy for the next five to ten years, was released.<sup>31</sup> According to this NPR, the conditions under which the United States could use nuclear weapons have been considerably curtailed. Thus it will not use nuclear weapons if it is attacked with conventional, biological or chemical weapons (subject to exceptions). Moreover, it will not develop any new nuclear weapons. The 2010 NPR also emphasises the combating of nuclear terrorism.

Tactical nuclear weapons are discussed in a separate section in the NPR, and reference is made to Russia's capacity: Russia maintains a much larger force of tactical nuclear weapons, a signif-



icant number of which are deployed near NATO allies. For this reason the NPR postulates that the United States will retain the capability to forward-deploy tactical nuclear weapons and proceed with full-scope life extension for the B61 bomb. The NPR states that tactical nuclear weapons should be included in any future Russian–US reduction arrangements, but any decision on the nuclear weapons deployed in Europe should be taken only after a thorough review within the Alliance.

## 3.2 Negotiations between the United States and Russia

In 2009 Russia and the United States opened formal negotiations on new strategic arms reductions as a follow-on to the 1991 *Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty* (START Treaty) and the 2002 *Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions* (SORT Treaty).<sup>32</sup> The *New START Treaty* was signed on 8 April 2010: it will reduce the number of strategic nuclear warheads of both nuclear weapon powers and re-establish mutual nuclear arms control and verification measures once it has entered into force.<sup>33</sup> As the treaty deals with reductions of strategic weapons it does not, of course, specify any limits on inventories of tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>34</sup> However, several calls were made to incorporate tactical nuclear weapons in the next round of Russian–US talks, and President Obama declared that he hoped to pursue discussions with Russia on reducing both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Poland and Norway<sup>36</sup> as well as the Swedish Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs<sup>37</sup> called for new talks on limiting non-strategic nuclear arms.

The US and Russian governments have traditionally released very little information to the public about their inventories of tactical nuclear weapons, which encourages rumours and mistrust. It is known, however, that the United States retains approximately 500 active tactical nuclear warheads, including 400 B61 gravity bombs, and half this number of B61s are deployed in Europe.<sup>38</sup> Estimates of the number of Russian tactical nuclear weapons range from 2,000 to 5,300.<sup>39</sup> The majority of these warheads, however, are old and will probably soon be retired. Nearly 650 Russian non-strategic air-delivery warheads are estimated to be operational.<sup>40</sup>

On 5 February 2010 Russia issued a new Military Doctrine, replacing the document of 2000. This text sets out stricter criteria for and less reliance on the use of nuclear weapons. Whereas the previous doctrine foresaw resort to nuclear weapons ‘in critical situations for Russia’s national security’, the current document cites only situations where ‘the very existence of Russia is under threat’. The 2010 doctrine emphasises strategic deterrent capacity, which indicates that Russia does not assign an essential role to its tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>41</sup>

On 3 May 2010 the United States published data on its nuclear weapon arsenal with the explicit claim that transparency of nuclear stockpiles is important for non-proliferation objectives. After the ratification and entry into force of the New START Treaty, the United States will pursue follow-on reductions that cover all nuclear weapons, both strategic and tactical.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3 NATO's nuclear strategy

Although the international context has changed dramatically since the end of the cold war, there has been no longstanding conceptual discussion within NATO about the role of tactical nuclear weapons. In recent years, however, NATO has focused on its nuclear policy. In late February 2010 five NATO member states (the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Germany and Luxembourg) asked NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to put nuclear strategy on the agenda of the informal NATO meeting to be held on 22–23 April in Estonia. Prior to the NATO summit Rasmussen had made it clear, however, that no breakthrough could be expected on the subject of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. He said: 'As long as nuclear weapons circulate in the world NATO will require a nuclear defence mechanism'.<sup>43</sup> On 22 April 2010 NATO's 28 member states decided that the US nuclear weapons in Europe could not be withdrawn unilaterally and without prior agreement by the Alliance because they are considered as 'essential for NATO's deterrent capacity'.<sup>44</sup>

In a speech at this meeting, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated that the United States does not oppose a reduction of tactical nuclear weapons, but she ruled out their unconditional removal. The United States will consider withdrawing its nuclear weapons from Europe only when Russia has made a commitment to move its non-strategic nuclear weapons away from the borders of the NATO member states.<sup>45</sup> She said that tactical nuclear weapons should be included in the next round of US–Russian arms control discussions.<sup>46</sup> Russia has, however, remained remarkably silent on the subject of its tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>47</sup> While both superpowers have been (unilaterally) reducing their tactical forces, Russia does not seem willing to engage in formal talks on such reductions. It is only prepared to enter into negotiations after all the United States' nuclear weapons have been withdrawn to US territory.<sup>48</sup> In the run-up to the Tallinn NATO Summit of April 2010, this view was confirmed by the Russian representative to NATO, Dmitri Rogozin.<sup>49</sup> Russia claims that there is no logical justification for these weapons given the conventional military superiority of the United States and NATO over Russia.<sup>50</sup>

The renewed focus of the international community on nuclear disarmament has given rise to a reconsideration of NATO's nuclear doctrine, including the trans-Atlantic nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>51</sup> The role of nuclear weapons in defending Alliance members will be discussed in connection with NATO's revision of its Strategic Concept, due to be released at the Lisbon

NATO Summit in November 2010.<sup>52</sup> A preparatory document for the new Strategic Concept (published on 17 May 2010), however, advocates maintaining US nuclear weapons on European soil.<sup>53</sup>

## 3.4 The Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conferences

The Non-Proliferation Treaty was opened for states' signature and ratification in 1968 for the purpose of achieving phased nuclear disarmament. All states have ratified this treaty, except for India, Pakistan and Israel. North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003. Every five years a Review Conference of the parties is held to review implementation of states' commitments under the treaty and a Final Document is drawn up. This review process offers an opportunity to negotiate the draw-down of tactical nuclear weapons,<sup>54</sup> irrespective of regional interests. It also provides a forum for countries to incite the nuclear weapon powers to reduce and eliminate their tactical nuclear weapons.

At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, tactical nuclear weapons were explicitly mentioned as the subject of practical measures for fulfilling the non-proliferation objectives of the NPT. The Final Document emphasised 'the further reduction of non-strategic nuclear weapons, based on unilateral initiatives and as an integral part of the nuclear arms reduction and disarmament process'.<sup>55</sup> The 2005 Review Conference, on the other hand, produced no concrete agreements and there was no consensus on a Final Document.<sup>56</sup>

The Final Document of the most recent conference, held on 3–28 May 2010, makes no mention of any measures or agreements on tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, in preparatory documents and discussions, the calls to reduce and eliminate this class of weapons were more vocal than at any previous conference.<sup>58</sup> The Council of the European Union<sup>59</sup>, the Netherlands<sup>60</sup> and Belgium<sup>61</sup> suggested that tactical nuclear weapons should be the subject of future negotiations between the United States and Russia. The German representative<sup>62</sup> did not explicitly refer to US–Russian negotiations but emphasised that there should be an agreement within NATO. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the only head of state participating in the conference, called on the United States to dismantle its tactical nuclear weapons stationed at NATO bases in Europe.<sup>63</sup>

Nuclear sharing within NATO has been heavily criticised in the NPT review process.<sup>64</sup> The United States is currently the only nuclear weapon power that deploys nuclear weapons outside its own territory.<sup>65</sup> Although US tactical nuclear weapons were already deployed in Europe when the Non-Proliferation Treaty was concluded, their presence may be interpreted as an

infraction of Articles I and II, according to which nuclear weapon states cannot devolve nuclear weapons or their control to other states and non-nuclear weapon states may not host nuclear weapons. During the preparations for the 2010 Review Conference, Russia called for an agreement on keeping nuclear weapons within the borders of the nuclear weapon states – in other words, a specific request that the United States withdraw its tactical weapons from Europe.<sup>66</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

NATO's nuclear strategy and the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are a product of the cold war. Initiatives of US and European leaders over the years, including President Obama's speech in Prague in April 2009, have led to a reconsideration of the conditions for the use of and the necessity for maintaining US nuclear weapons in West European NATO countries. In Belgium there have been both federal and regional calls for nuclear disarmament and a nuclear-free world. The United States' nuclear strategy, the disarmament negotiations between the United States and Russia, the discussions within NATO and the NPT Review Conferences are all part of the international framework of these demands.

The two key players, the United States and Russia, each set out a new framework for their respective nuclear strategies in 2010. The documents do not stipulate reductions in their nuclear arsenals but rather delineate the circumstances in which nuclear weapons could ever be used. The two states signed the New START Treaty on 8 April 2010 on reductions of their strategic nuclear missiles, but they have not addressed their tactical nuclear weapons (in Europe or elsewhere). The door was nevertheless left open for negotiations on non-strategic nuclear weapons in the positive momentum of the signing of this treaty. The next significant step for keeping up this momentum will be ratification of the treaty by the US Senate and the Russian Federal Assembly so that the New START Treaty can actually enter into force.

A debate has been raging within NATO about nuclear strategy in the run-up to the current review of the Alliance's Strategic Concept. Opinions are divided: West European countries consider the presence of nuclear weapons in Europe to be a useless relic of the cold war and advocate their removal, while the East and Central European states see the presence of these weapons as a necessary deterrent against any threat from Russia and as a symbol of the trans-Atlantic commitments. With a view to preserving NATO's cohesion amidst differences between Eastern and Western Europe, little has been done towards the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. There is a general consensus that decisions on this subject have to be taken by mutual agreement. The Alliance's new Strategic Concept, which is expected to be released by the end of 2010, will be crucial for determining NATO's new nuclear policy.

The presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe is a topic that is also debated in the Non-Proliferation Treaty review process. Although there was discussion of the reduction and elimination of tactical nuclear weapons at the May 2010 NPT Review Conference, this was not mentioned in the conference's Final Document.

The European Union has not taken any explicit initiatives towards removing US nuclear weapons from Europe, but it did call on the United States and Russia to open negotiations on their tactical nuclear weapons. The United States is in principle not opposed to withdrawing its nuclear weapons from European soil but the US Government does not want to make any unilateral or unconditional commitments to this effect. It wants to consider this only in negotiations with Russia and in NATO discussions of nuclear strategy.

Although tactical nuclear weapons became militarily superfluous after the cold war and although important positive developments have taken place at the international diplomatic level, the removal of US nuclear weapons from Europe is far from a certain outcome. The outcome of the debate in NATO and the possible intensification of international pressure to take advantage of the momentum for nuclear disarmament will be crucial.

If there is no international consensus on tactical nuclear disarmament and a decision is made at NATO level to maintain US nuclear weapons in Europe, there will be a number of significant consequences. First, additional financial investments will be required from the NATO host states due to the necessary life extensions - and ultimately replacement - of the aircraft that can carry these bombs. Second, the risk of theft of tactical nuclear weapons will have to be dealt with and additional (financial) efforts will have to be made to secure their storage facilities.

Finally, the continued deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe sends a bad signal to countries with nuclear ambitions, such as Iran and North Korea, because it contradicts the non-proliferation standards that the United States and Europe wish to impose on other countries. Moreover, the United States is the only nuclear weapon state that deploys tactical nuclear weapons outside its own territory, and this is contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. At the international level, the reduction or complete withdrawal of the US nuclear weapons currently deployed in Europe would have positive effects on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.<sup>67</sup> Importantly, it would demonstrate that the United States' initiatives for and commitments to non-proliferation and to keep the reduction of arsenals on the international agenda are sincere and that they are supported in Europe.





## End notes

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