Dimensions of Social Integration: Appraisal of Theoretical Approaches

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the main theoretical points of the concepts of social integration, social participation, social exclusion, and social capital. They cover determinants that condition a certain position in the social environment, as well as possible resources that determine different integration strategies or adaptation routes in different groups. I consider them in the context of ethnic studies and the social and cultural status of ethnic minority groups in particular and highlight their relevance for developing empirical research. References to various social studies and research are used to illustrate analytical methods and their empirical implications.

Constant changes in contemporary societies challenge their members to be ready to adjust. Social actors are in constant search for new strategies of integration and often have to concentrate all their skills in order to take advantages of available opportunities. During the great transformations in Eastern Europe over the last decade, ethnic groups were often confronted by new requirements emerging from redefined citizenship, civic loyalty, knowledge of the state language, value changes, participation in the newly formed bodies of the private or non-governmental sectors, etc. Ethnic groups had to respond in a more active or passive way or avoid adaptation through emigration, segregation, or life in closed communities. Both minorities and majorities went through multiple processes conceptualised in different terms, such as adaptation, acculturation, assimilation, or integration. This paper takes a look at how the concept of integration can help to understand ethnic processes in the social formation of a new nature and quality.

Besides being a basic element of the vocabulary of social science, “integration” came to dominate the ethnic policy discourse in most countries of Eastern Europe after 1990. New legal mechanisms, rights, international conventions, and treaties were intended and declared to promote the integration of national minorities. In Lithuania, most discussions on the issues of ethnicity and national minorities were concerned about the civil and political loyalty of the minorities. Therefore, the idea of integration was also politicised, particularly in the framework of public opinion. Nonetheless, the creation of a proper legal framework for minorities has been more or less successful. Yet the legally defined mechanisms, even if crucial to the development of civic society, are not sufficient for social developments. Ethnic processes remain a social challenge in that
some problems have not yet been overcome – e.g., negative attitudes, concerns with ethnic purity, symbolic and real cleavages in the labour market and the public sector, treatment in the mass media, etc.

Despite the perspective of social integration lacking a comprehensive theoretical and empirical basis, it is a useful framework for fruitful studies of ethnic processes. The advantage of the integration perspective comes from its focus on various social dimensions that are crucial in the evolution of ethnic groups. This paper focuses on the main theoretical points of the concepts of social integration, social participation, social exclusion, and social capital. I discuss them in the context of ethnic studies and the social and cultural status of ethnic groups in particular. Each of these concepts could be further elaborated on a separate basis, but this paper emphasises those aspects that can inform and be applied to further analysis in empirical research. The concepts chosen for discussion cover determinants that condition a certain position in the social milieu, as well as possible resources that determine different integration strategies or adaptation routes in different groups. References to various social studies and research are used to illustrate analytical methods and their empirical implications.

Theoretical aspects of social integration

On the theoretic level, social integration indicates principles by which individuals (actors, agents, or subjects) are bound to each other in the social space and it refers to relations among the actors, i.e. how the actors (agents) accept social rules. Integration of a social system means the reciprocal interaction of segments of a certain social structure. Regardless of the direct meaning of integration as a word, it is not presumed that the relations or interactions are harmonious. Integration covers conceptions of conflict as well as order, so the same concept could be applied to forms of stability of social relations and compensation of balance among different social units and groups. In the broadest sense, the term integration is used to define developments that determine connections of related diverse elements into the social whole, system, community, or other unit. The concept of integration is a fundamental one in functionalist theories, and it defines a mode of relations of the units of a system by virtue of which, on one hand, they act to avoid disrupting the system, and, on the other hand, they cooperate to promote its functioning as a unit. The conception of integrity is important in other theoretical perspectives that use other concepts as well, e.g. consensus, solidarity, correspondence, etc.

When discussing ethnic processes, the concept of integration is not just closely related to the processes of socialisation, acculturation, and assimilation, but it is also an inseparable part of the course and result of these processes. Every phenomenon of social integration is conditional and insufficient because it is a
continuous process, a certain level of which is necessary for the functioning of every social system. Considering the concept of integration in the context of the theories of ethnicity, relations among ethnic groups, conceptions of integration, assimilation or pluralism can be discussed in a broad continuum, i.e. different aspects provide a great variety of possible interpretations.

When developing integration theories for contemporary multicultural societies, it is necessary to overstep reductionistic “objective” interpretations, i.e. if earlier the focus was on economic, political, or residential integration, at the moment cultural matters of difference, symbolic resources, and “cultural hierarchy”, as well as mutual relations between individuals and different groups are taken into account in the discourse of integration (e.g. Gordon, Price, Esser, Smith, and others). The majority of contemporary researchers and theorists assume that integration is a social issue rather than an administrative, bureaucratic, or legal one¹ (e.g. Kamali 1999). The widely applied variables of integration, such as profession and incomes², do not take into account an active role and creative actions of members of social groups in influencing the social environment that surrounds them or constructing social reality. Traditional sociological explanations of the prevailing race, ethnic, and gender inequalities in the labour market are theoretically and empirically grounded in the contemporary paradigms of social stratification, i.e. status attainment research and segmented labour market theory, both maintaining that the above-mentioned groups have a lower level of education and less labour market experience and therefore find themselves in the periphery (Smith 2000). Quite recently, a growing body of research has begun to examine labour market inequalities as a function of differential social capital, generally defined as the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes 2000). For example, when analysing inequalities in the labour market in respect to race, ethnicity, and gender, Sandra Smith takes into account other factors such as the abilities of individuals to convert their education into social capital. This researcher states that the decisive role is played by social networks, the possession of which increases opportunities for status, income, and professional achievements. Another illustration could be a theory of status construction that main-

¹ The analysis of the EU documents, studies, and research enables one to expect that the general policies of the EU will be developed in a similar way. During recent years a greater emphasis has been put on the formation of general integration policy, considering problems of different socially vulnerable groups (e.g., the disabled, ethnic groups, women, migrants, long-term unemployed, etc.). It has slowly become clear that legal procedures alone are not enough to ensure social integration.

² I strongly agree with the authors maintaining that society is more than professional groups. Also, it is worth adding that a subjective aspect is characteristic to social integration, i.e. the attitudes, values and beliefs of individuals and different groups in respect to the social order in which they act.
tains that when constructing a certain network, individuals take into account the differences of others, i.e. gender, race, or ethnicity, and they rate each other according to the amount and symbolic value of resources possessed. The knowledge of the competencies that differentiate and rate individuals according the characteristics ascribed (such as ethnicity) is generalised and applied in social interactions. As a consequence, certain groups, regardless of their competencies, are “excluded” (putting this in another way, “protected”) from networks and systems that provide power (McGuire 2000).

Recent research and studies conclude that the differences and inequality of social groups can not be analysed and evaluated only in terms of distribution and control over economic resources (Melucci, Smith, Portes, and others). The structural analysis of social misbalance should cover the differentiation of social positions that distribute powerful symbolic resources. In addition, it is important to consider whether cleavages and different positions are a result of personal or structural exclusion/inclusion.

Moreover, identities, attitudes, behaviour, and participation in the social sphere of ethnic groups are influenced not only by the matters that take place within the boundaries of ethnic groups or in relation to other groups, but by the processes that take place in the broader society. What matters is how ethnicity will be treated in the future, how it will affect social mobility and participation in majority society. On the other hand, social integration is related to an individual’s position in the social topography and an individual’s capabilities and opportunities to apply those capabilities. Also, it is very important to consider the status or position in the social topography that an individual ascribes to her/himself, how s/he perceives her/himself in the social context. In addition, an important matter is what could be defined as an individual’s “visibility” in the social topography, i.e. the symbolic significance of the position held. Hypothetically, less educated, less organised, and less mobilised individuals and their groups are less visible. Generally speaking, a discussion of such a complex phenomenon as integration requires a concrete discussion about differences and different strategies employed by various members of social groups.

Several theoretical conceptions, which are closely related to the outcomes and results of social, structural, and institutional integration are discussed. Although social participation, social exclusion, and social capital could be the subject of separate studies, here they are presented in the context of social integration.

Social participation

The outcome of the successful adaptation and integration of the majority of the population of different ethnic groups is social participation in full. A multidimensional concept of social participation is used here in the broadest sense and
covers a lot of issues, e.g. ethnically indivisible civic and political participation; involvement in the economic, political, and cultural life of society; representation at different levels of governance, participation in groups of fellow citizens; etc. Such a conception of social participation enables maintaining that it ensures stability and irreversibility of integration (of course at different levels of intensity and activity). Also, since participation is considered a process and a flexible concept, it can mean various things under different circumstances for different individuals, groups, or institutions.

Social participation could be described as one of the dimensions of social integration, i.e. participation in the construction and reconstruction of social reality or in the production and reproduction of social life. Another dimension could be based on exercising and having a sense of belonging and satisfaction (Kamali 1999). When participating in social life, individuals get involved in social relations that comprise grounds for successful strategies and satisfaction (for example, being a teacher is not just giving lectures and participating in daily activities in educational centres, but also participating in the reproduction of society through transferring human capital. It also means accepting the very basis of the educational system. This acceptance of the system is not, however, based on the belief in pre-existing ‘rules’ or ‘truths’; it depends on a process of incorporation of characteristics (habitus) that determines how one acts, thinks, understands, and evaluates one’s own and others’ actions. Further elaborating this example in respect to a teacher working at a Lithuanian school of ethnic minorities (or to be more precise at a school with instruction in a minority language) being a teacher means not only rendering the cultural values of minorities, but also rendering the cultural conceptions of the majority’s society.

Participation in social life encompasses abilities and opportunities to recognise social reality and at the same time to be recognised by members of other community groups. The integral social action of an individual is a dialectical self-realisation process that takes place in a known social context that provides appropriate means for meaningful social action. These means cover positions and opportunities that are necessary to act for individuals and groups according to their dispositions, i.e. according to incorporated knowledge of social life (Kamali 1999).

Relations between an individual and social reality develop through the individual’s skills and competencies that enable acting according to structural rules of social reality. Therefore, in defining ethnicity and ethnic groups, such characteristics as civic loyalty to the state and symbolic and cultural aspects are more important than ties of blood, language, history, or common decent. When analysing the influence of social reality on different forms and levels of participation, Anderson states that participation is socially learned and socially stimulated. Such statements are based on empirical studies that lead to the conclusion that, for
example, politically active and politically inactive citizens differ in demographic characteristics, but not in their attitudes towards politics. Despite the fact that the “activists” are usually higher on the social scale and are men, their attitudes do not differ from those of non-active citizens (Anderson 1996).

In general, participation is qualified and rated depending on membership and activity in social bodies or organisations. When considering political or civic participation in particular, ways of conventional (e.g., voting, petition writing, participation in meetings) and non-conventional (e.g., protests, pickets) participation are distinguished. If the tendencies of participation between the majority and minority groups are similar, to a certain extent they could be treated as an index of integration.

Generally speaking, more or less active participation in social life can take different shapes and natures and is one of the most important factors of social integration. On the other hand, insufficient participation by the members of ethnic groups in different levels of the social sphere may be one of the factors forming ethnic cleavages or social exclusion. In its own turn, a real or conceived ethnic inequality creates a vicious circle of problems: it becomes grounds for the political mobilisation of ethnic groups or it may condition the atrophy of civics and indifference, avoiding the social and political life of the country (Kasatkina, Leončikas 2000). Also, the politicisation of the decisions that influence community life requires group organisation and emphasises the need for organisation and mobilisation. An ethnic group becomes a comfortable means for demanding certain rights and therefore a means to regulate social relations.

In terms of orientation towards action, ethnicity or cultural differences can become a criterion according to which the defence of a group’s interests against discrimination, marginalisation, or social exclusion are organised. Also, these differences may become a channel to express demands for new rights or to define a civic (and political) space for socially excluded groups. In this context ethnicity is best understood not as a phenomenon of common origin, or descent (genetic phenomenon), but as a strategic choice of individuals, which (ethnicity) under other circumstances could be expressed as a “membership” in other groups applied to achieve certain power or rights.

Social exclusion

The concept social exclusion\(^3\) has recently taken root in sociology. It indicates marginalisation in the broadest sense of the term, i.e. it covers the out-

\(^3\) The concept of social exclusion is more used in European discourse; in an Anglo-Saxon context the term “underclass” is more usual. The latter in fact rejects class theory and indicates existing social groups that are under the boundaries of the “main” society or
comes and results of processes that determine and define certain groups as being not a constituent part of “normal” society. Different authors present different definitions of social exclusion, but on the whole it is agreed that this phenomenon is related to the scarcity of material and social opportunities and the lack of skills to participate in economic, social, political, and cultural life in an effective way and is related to alienation or estrangement from the main part of society (Klasen 1998; Combes 1998; Andersen 1999; and others). On the other hand, the term also covers the denial and non-realisation of the civic, political, and social rights of citizenship (Klasen 1998), i.e. it can be treated as an expression of the unequal distribution of various rights. In this way social exclusion is a universal category that includes economic, political, cultural, religious, and social aspects and discusses multidimensional mechanisms that exclude individuals or groups from participation in social exchanges and rights for social integration (Andersen 1999).

Also, the term implies the existence of at least two distinct groups: a closed group (the social dimension, society) and a second group that does not exhibit those attributes of developing membership that are the defining characteristics of the first group (Combes 1998). As was already mentioned, the term is related to processes and their outcomes; therefore, both mechanisms of the process and agents or subjects can be analysed. There is always an open question of whose perspective the term presents: of those excluded or those who are not excluded, i.e. those who are included. Once again, exclusion prompts several kinds of reactions. The first one is of powerlessness and alienation in which the individual internalises the failure and descends into apathy because s/he feels that it has been pre-ordained by fate. The second, on the contrary, leads to what is often delinquent behaviour aimed at overturning the barriers to participation and integration.

On the other hand, an individual has certain resources that can be applied to overcome social exclusion. At the centre of these resources is “relational” capital or integration into social relations. The different spheres in which an individual participates or to which s/he belongs could be ranked according to the

society of the majority (Goldberg, Andersen). This term is usually applied to the unemployed, poorly paid groups, single parent families, etc. (Murray, Giddens, Gans), and it focuses mainly on the economic aspects of social exclusion. Although a lot of discussions take place on the resources of exclusion, in recent discussions it is usually mentioned that even the structure of individuals’ or groups’ consciousness, life style or the lack of certain skills could be a resource for social exclusion. Goldberg maintains that the concept of social exclusion can be treated as the European form of racism: it is exclusion at a distance or “internal exclusion” (Goldberg 2000). In fact, structural mechanisms operating in society that determine a certain position of one or another group, as well as social exclusion are discussed in this paper.
level of their integration or inclusion of other individuals in separate or common spheres of interests and to the level of their exclusion. Thus, social exclusion, as an opposition to inclusion, could be analysed as an outcome of disintegration or as an alternative to integration.

It is worth discussing one more aspect. The granting of economic, political, cultural, and civic rights plays an important role. Establishing mechanisms that enable the effective use of these rights for those who lack these rights and to which these civic rights are addressed is also crucial. This process could be defined as the empowerment of separate groups or their units. With reference to the ethnic groups in Lithuania, the recently empowered groups are the largest minority groups (Poles and Russians), whereas the Roma still lack some kind of empowerment.4

Empowerment, as well as social capital, is closely related to human capital, i.e. it is the formation of knowledge and skills that determine increasing participation, greater power and control in decision-making, as well as a transformative action. Politics of empowerment5 and inclusion (as well as participation) should include differences in respect to ethnicity, gender, and age and transform these differences into stable but flexible coalitions operating on different levels. On the level of social integration a paradigm of social exclusion is relevant analysing the changing balance6 of power between social actors or agents.

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4 An indicator of empowerment could be the number of non-governmental organisations established by the ethnic groups, although their social effectiveness or roles in terms of civic society as a mediator between governmental structures and different groups of citizens could be a separate topic for discussions. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the activities of Polish or Russian organisations and political parties are more effective than those founded by the Roma. Still a certain paradox between the high number of NGOs of national minorities and their poor social efficiency is obvious. In 2001, 244 organisations representing 20 national minorities were registered in Lithuania, e.g. the Russian minority has 56 organisations, Polish – 53, Jewish – 29, Romany – 13, German – 32, Greek – 5, Belarussian – 18, Tartar – 12, etc. It is possible to state hypothetically that the majority of the NGOs established by ethnic groups could be defined as self-help organisations. Wann indicates the following main characteristics and fields of activities of self-help groups: emotional support, information, advice and practical aid, recruitment of new members, publicity and education, fund raising, etc. In the communities of ethnic groups, the purposes of self-help groups are of a more general nature (they are not specific); they encompass voluntary activities that are closely related to the empowerment and achievement of equality in society (Wann 1995: 58). In fact, such organisations and groups are related to the need of people to have their own sphere. They also become a visible social unit.

5 The concept of empowerment is closely related to the analysis of social movements (Melucci, 1999).

6 Melucci states that social exclusion or marginality are defined in terms of the system and if these differences are denied both internally and externally in respect of the system, the misbalance of power becomes invisible (Melucci 1999).
Social capital

The concept of social capital has become one of the most popular in sociological discourse of late years and lots of literature on this topic have appeared. Like the other concepts used in this paper, a multidimensional concept of social capital could be interpreted in different ways and mean different things. Also, a theoretical discussion of this concept could be the subject of separate studies. It is worth noting that there is no common agreement on what perspectives or aspects of social reality should be defined as social capital. The empirical aspect is rather problematic: how social capital should be measured, what measures or indicators should be used, etc. Summarising the works of different authors, it is possible to state that social capital is usually discussed as being present or absent. It is obvious that it is quite complicated to distinguish certain levels of this phenomenon.

Generally speaking, social capital is an outcome of participation in the social context. It could be defined by horizontal interrelations of social agents (both individuals and groups) based on trust, communication, and activities that comprise the grounds for material or symbolic exchanges or deals, as well as for different associations. The perspective of social capital is relevant to discussing the social empowerment of individuals or social groups and defining the level of individuals’ participation in the social sphere. On the other hand, social capital indicates characteristics of a social organisation in the broadest sense: relations, principles, norms, social trust, and structures increasing the effectiveness of social agents and inducing mutual communication and co-operation.

Lesser maintains that in the literature of social capital there are two primary perspectives of thought that focus on the structural aspects of relationships. The first perspective is primarily related to the connections that individual actors have with one another. The second is referred to as the sociocentric approach of the network structure. This perspective asserts that social capital is based on a person’s relative position within a given network rather than the individual’s direct relationship with people in the network (Lesser 2000). So it is possible to distinguish two levels of social capital that could be relatively defined as fol-

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8 Generally speaking, two factors are the most obvious when discussing social capital – they are “social” and “capital” and they determine a dominating discourse that, on one hand, focuses on social networks and the development of social relations and, on other hand, is analysed in comparison to other types of capital, such as economic, usually when discussing resources and their distribution and influence. Also, social capital is closely related to human capital, i.e. the knowledge, skills, and capacities of individuals that ensure social and economic development, e.g. P.Rich analyses the connections of social capital, culture, and political culture, focusing on the symbolic aspects of the capital.
lows: (i) the internal one concentrating in or generating certain resources, skills from interpersonal or intergroup relations; and (ii) the level of social capital that is external and generated from the structures of collective actors (e.g., organisations, communities, regions, nations, etc.).

Bourdieu, who was the first to present a systematic analysis of social capital, as well as other authors analysing these issues, apply the concept of social capital in an instrumental way, i.e. by first of all indicating the benefits that individuals, groups, or other social agents gain from participation in the social sphere and from constructing social resources. In this sense two elements of social capital can be distinguished: social relations that enable social agents to reach resources and the quality and quantity of the resources.

Most authors tend to agree that the best field for the expression and development of social capital is the civic society, in the context of which people, as the result of mutual communication and co-operation create and get involved in a network of voluntary associations for the sake of their families, beliefs, interests, ideologies, etc. The interconnection of social capital and civic culture is based on the main part of social capital and trust (Foley 1998). Generally, it is agreed that social capital comprises three main components: trust, social networks, and norms. These main components could be divided in a more detailed way, for example, obligations, exchanges, solidarity, expectations, values, results of activities (benefits, profit), etc.

The functional perspective of social capital is also related to the problems of social integration discussed above. Portes distinguishes three main functions of social capital: social control (based on closed relations, mutual obligations), support (usually attributed to the roles of family), and social network (Portes 2000). The third function of social capital is usually used in the field of social stratification. In this sense the concept of social capital is explained as the possibilities or skills to find a job, issues of social mobility, and the success of different social (and economic) transactions. The authors previously mentioned recognise that the social network and social participation are instrumental to an individual’s mobility (e.g., informal recommendations). Also, social capital places an emphasis on the significance of the infrastructure, the importance of the systems of education, health, transport, and communication in the context of the processes of social integration.

A systematic analysis of social capital should also include several issues that could be identified as the bearers or subjects of social capital, needs for resources

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9 In other words, micro and macro levels can be distinguished.

10 The functional perspective is based on the works of J.Coleman, who focuses on mechanisms that generate social capital.

11 The research and studies of Smith, McGuire, and others could be mentioned in this context.
of social capital and the resources themselves. Usually, only the positive effects of social capital are discussed, but the negative ones such as exclusion, isolation of outsiders, infinite pretensions to the members of the group, the restriction of individual freedom, downward levelling norms, etc. should not be ignored. The same strong networks and social relations that produce benefits for the group members usually limit the access of others, e.g., monopoly units, homogeneous units. Ethnic groups also use social capital to gain economic, social, cultural, and relevant benefits.

Empirical perspective

Moving from theoretical considerations to possible empirical solutions, I would like to discuss indicators that could be used in the empirical measurement of social capital, social participation, or social inclusion. Stolle and Rochon produce a reasonable set of the indicators of social capital (Stolle and Rochon 1998). It is possible to distinguish four main groups of indicators. The empirical data of those four groups provides a notion of an individual situation in regards to social capital.

The first group covers issues related to participation and involvement in the social field, e.g. participation in various political, civic, or non-governmental organisations. These activities could range from contacting public officials to taking part in boycotts, demonstrations, and election campaigns, as well as getting involved in community responsibilities or writing a community letter or article for a newspaper. In a more passive way of acting, the indicators of this group could be operationalised as interest in politics, strength of political interest, propensity to discuss political matters with friends, etc.

The second group of indicators is related to the issues of trust and community. These indicators involve issues of trust in others and whether people would try to take advantage of someone if they got a chance. Generalised and more specific forms (e.g. interpersonal, intergroup) of trust could be distinguished. Here questions of social distance are relevant. This group of indicators has to deal with a qualitative dimension that involves different modes of community in different organisations or groups. In addition, being a member of one group increases the trust in other group and creates possibilities for hostility towards other groups, i.e. some distinctiveness of the groups could be observed.

The next group of indicators is related to political trust, i.e. confidence in the people running the executive branch and governing bodies and trust in parliament, parliamentarians, governmental institutions, government officials, the judicial system, etc. It also involves issues of political efficacy, the belief that governmental officials care about the public interests and the ability to influence politics or make claims on officials.
The last group includes indicators of attitudes: tolerance, free-riding, optimism, and future prospects. Attitudes towards outsiders and marginalised people could be measured. Free-riding or independent activities combine responses to questions about cheating on taxes when having a chance, avoiding fares, claiming governmental benefits to which you are not entitled, etc. The last subgroup of this set of indicators indicates a positive or negative outlook about the future, plans for the next several years, and related issues.

The first groups of indicators (participation, involvement) are more easily measured and observed. Of course, a detailed set of the indicators relevant to one or another study is a separate object of discussions. Operationalisation of the concepts and discussion of their methodological validity is therefore always a task before undertaking any particular research.

The aforementioned empirical indicators, if measured in respect to ethnic differences (including both minority and majority groups) and combined with other data, could reveal the existing ethnic structure and indicate possible cleavages, balance of power and patterns of domination in a given society or its subsections. Moreover, the data collected through these indicators reveal the expectations and conceptions of both the minorities and the majority and can provide serious input to policy formation.

As a brief summarisation, it is possible to state that social integration or the politics of inclusion (as opposite to exclusion) is expressed and realised through social participation that is based on agents’ social capital. The dimensions of social integration discussed in this paper (social participation, social exclusion/inclusion and social capital) are distinguishable only to a certain extent as they are sufficiently underpin and interconnected concepts. However, they remain useful perspectives that explain the processes, facts, and other phenomena related to the integration of ethnic groups.

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