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Greening recovery – Overcoming policy incoherence for sustainability transformations

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Abstract

Policy coherence is crucial in the 2030 Agenda's transformative ambitions and heralded as of paramount importance to ensure the successful implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and climate policy targets. Despite political efforts to achieve policy coherence, apparent trade-offs and goal conflicts have emerged – even in a proclaimed 'front-runner' country like Sweden. This paper examines the role of ideas in proposing and legitimising policy options and achieving policy coherence in the light of the Swedish recovery debate in 2020 following the COVID-19 pandemic. Ideas of a green economic recovery put forward in the public debate are examined through thematic text and frame analysis. We show that ideas of a green transition, boosted by economic recovery spending, draw on a synergistic frame in combining social, environmental, and economic policy options, carrying a potential for coherency. However, the absence of a discussion on power, as in who stands to gain what under which circumstances, coupled with an inherent understanding of a temporal hierarchy of policy priorities does not only impact the ability to design coherent policies but may have considerable impacts on the prospects of achieving sustainability transformations.

KEYWORDS
green recovery, ideas, policy coherence, societal transformations

1 | INTRODUCTION

The calls for policy coherence for sustainable development and transformations have been increasing since the adoption of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda, and there is a vast body of literature on policy coherence and integration of sustainable development agendas, climate change governance, development- or energy policy (see e.g., Bocquillon, 2018; Carbone, 2008; Carbone et al., 2016; Dombrowsky et al., 2022; Glass & Newig, 2019; Koff, 2017; Lenschow et al., 2018; May et al., 2006; McGowan et al., 2019; Nilsson et al., 2012; Nilsson & Persson, 2017; Strambo et al., 2015; Tosun & Lang, 2017; Tosun & Leininger, 2017). Despite the calls to understand temporal—(OECD, 2015), and political- (Bocquillon, 2018) impacts on coherence, less is known empirically of how such factors impact coherent policymaking. The disruptive COVID-19 pandemic were seen by many as an opportunity to 'Build Back Better'(OECD, 2020), or a 'policy window' (Kuylenstierna et al., 2021) to overcome policy incoherence and accelerate societal transformations towards sustainability. By analysing the COVID-19 recovery debate in Sweden, from the onset of the pandemic (when the majority of articles on the topic was published) and over the course of the following year, this paper addresses the temporal and political factors of policy coherence by looking at the arguments presented when short timeframes of immediate recovery need to be reconciled with long-term structural changes and goals. What priorities come to the fore, and can they be made coherent and synergetic?

To understand the temporal and political factors affecting policy coherence we use ideas and frames as analytical tools to understand policy prescriptions and solutions present in the recovery debate. Within policy studies, ideas are often defined as perceptions of a problem, defining options for policy, and representing societal values (Gauvin, 2014). A key assumption is that ideas have a powerful impact on policy change (Béland et al., 2007; Blyth, 2002; Gauvin, 2014; Hall, 1997; Hay, 2004). Linking the role of ideas further to policy, Campbell (1998, 2020) offers a useful distinction between ideas of policy prescriptions (identified as concepts in the foreground of the policy debate) and ideas that legitimise policy solutions (identified as symbols and concepts that constitute frames). *Framing* offers an important addition to the study of ideas and policy as it helps to identify how ideas are connected, which ideas appear as centrally organising and what lies at the heart of the issue (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Goffman, 1974; Nisbet, 2009; Rein & Schön, 1993). Connecting ideas and frames to policy coherence, recent studies have pointed to the under-researched – but potentially critical – effects of frames and ideas on policy (in)coherence (Bocquillon, 2018; Lenschow et al., 2018). Bocquillon (2018, p. 341) – drawing on May et al. (2006) – states that "policy frames act as policy glue – or organising idea – binding issues and actors together". Coherence is thereby constructed, he argues, by discourses through problem formulation. Considering the less empirically researched effect of ideas and frames on policy (in)coherence, this paper seeks to contribute to this emerging body of literature, with a particular focus on investigating ideas and frames expressed in turbulent and disruptive times.

During the pandemic, Sweden attracted international attention as it opted for fewer restrictions than many neighbouring countries; it is also a country with an outspoken ambition to take leadership both in 'societal transformations towards decarbonisation' (SOU 2016:21, 2016) and in the coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Hence, it provides a fruitful context in which to study the potential tension between ideas of short-term recovery and those of transformative sustainable change, by asking:

1. Which ideas and frames emerge from the recovery debate and what implications could these have on policy coherence for sustainability transformations?
2. How do the ideas and frames correspond to government recovery priorities?

The paper first provides a background and theoretical context to the study of the recovery debate in Sweden. Followed by an outline of our methodological approach, presentation of results and a discussion on our research questions, scientific contributions and recommendations for future inquiries.

2 | BACKGROUND

In 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the new Climate Act had just started in Sweden. This was supported by a new government inquiry into how policy coherence could be enhanced and which laws across various policy areas were not conducive to achieving the national climate targets (Government of Sweden, 2019). The Swedish Climate Policy Council pointed towards a need for clearer leadership and instrument alignment in avoiding or tackling apparent goal conflicts (Bonde et al., 2020). Simultaneously, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs had been given new impetus through the designation of a national coordinator (Government of Sweden, 2020a). However, the COVID-19 pandemic put Sweden's climate- and Agenda 2030 ambitions to the test. In March 2020, as an immediate response to the outbreak, industrial bail-out packages were being discussed, for instance directed towards the airline industry. This support for a high-emission industry – at around SEK 11 billion (∼EUR 1 billion), representing more than half of the annual government budget for environment policy (Government of Sweden, 2020) – came soon after major political discussions in late 2019 on government support for expanding the main national airport, on the grounds of it being incoherent with Sweden's climate targets. The lack of coherence with national climate targets was hence seen as thwarting efforts to spur sustainability transformations in Sweden.

3 | THEORY

3.1 | Policy coherence & societal transformations

Policy coherence is a central tool for national implementation of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). Although definitions of the concept vary; from instrumental, for example, policy coherence as "the ability of multiple goals to co-exist with each other in a logical fashion" (Howlett & Rayner, 2013, p. 170), to more political, for example, as an attribute which "promotes synergies between and within different policy areas to achieve outcomes associated with jointly agreed policy objectives" (Nilsson et al., 2012, p. 369). Although widely researched, studies on policy coherence tend to focus on cross-sectoral aspects of coherence (Carbone, 2008; Carbone et al., 2016; Dombrowsky et al., 2022; Glass & Newig, 2019; Koff, 2017; May et al., 2006; McGowan et al., 2019; Monkelbaan, 2019; Nilsson et al., 2012; Tosun & Lang, 2017; Tosun & Leininger, 2017), and less so on the political and temporal factors. However, previous studies indicate that potential incoherence may be due not only to incongruent goals, but potentially, to the existence of differing frames, discourses and underlying values or power asymmetries impacting policy design and implementation (Bocquillon, 2018; Dombrowsky et al., 2022; Lenschow et al., 2018; Strambo et al., 2015). For example, how synergies are framed and how they can be regarded as positive, negative or neutral for different actors is essential for political discussions on trade-offs (Linnér, 2006). Although temporal aspects are recognised as potentially impacting policy coherence, for example through the use of ombudsmen for future generations to assess the intergenerational impacts (CCIC, 2018), there is typically no guidance on how to seek coherence under time pressure in SDG policy guidance. However, sudden shifts in political momentum have been shown to have a considerable effect on policy coherence. For

instance, addressing horizontal policy coherence and the European Union, Lenschow et al. (2018, p. 325) argue how the climate change momentum (the Copenhagen Summit and the Commission and the European Council's joint activism and leadership) contributed to policy synergies that enabled "the conversion of two out of three common targets (20% GHG reduction target and 20% renewables target by 2020) into a set of relatively coherent policy instruments". However, as conditions shifted during the financial crisis of 2008–2009, EU decision-makers focused on more short-term challenges in relation to the Energy Efficiency and Emissions Trading Directives, illustrating that "in times of crisis, environmental/climate change and economic/industrial objectives become more openly conflictual" (Lenschow et al., 2018, p. 325).

The transformative ambitions of the 2030 Agenda further raise questions on the temporal dimensions of policy coherence. The time scales for envisioned transformations range from quantum leap approaches with rapid, revolutionary changes of the entire socio-technical systems until 2030 (e.g., Future Earth & Earth League, 2018) to protracted cultural shifts over the entire century (e.g., Homer-Dixon, 2009). By transformation, we refer to the systemic non-linear change of societal structures encompassing technology, economy, culture, institutions, politics, societal organisation, norms and values, as well as the environment (e.g., Feola, 2015; Hölscher et al., 2018; Linnér & Wibeck, 2019). Consequently, democratisation of societal transformations concerns institutional, social, economic, epistemic and technological governance considerations (Pickering et al., 2022). This broad playing field provides a fundamental challenge for achieving coherence.

The role of policy coherence for transformative policies has gained increased attention in the environmental policy and planning literature. Silo-thinking and ensuing policy incoherence is often presented as thwarting efforts to spur transformative change (Linnér & Wibeck, 2019). If seeking policy coherence entails reconciling between alternative visions and prevailing strategies, however, this may hinder the further development of new competing and transformative pathways to sustainable development (Jacob & Ekins, 2020). Furthermore, the contested and political nature of many sustainability issues, and the strive for coherence may in fact lead to a conflict-avoidant behaviour among decision-makers (Wong & Heijden, 2019). Such a structure, where consensus is promoted over conflict and making difficult priorities, is outlined as one of the key reasons why integration regimes (such as seeking policy coherence with the 2030 Agenda) have not produced transformational changes (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2015). From this perspective, policy coherence would not be necessary, or even desirable, in all instances.

While the transformation concept has attracted increasing attention in sustainability science and policy discourse during the past few years, there is ongoing discussion in the literature about what spurs transformative change and to what extent transformations can be governed (e.g., Linnér & Wibeck, 2019; Patterson et al., 2017; Pickering et al., 2022). The dynamic complexity characterising interactions within societal systems (Flood, 1999) further complicates the challenge of managing policy coherence. In view of such complexity, literature on leadership for sustainability transformations points to the importance of polycentric and collaborative approaches to leadership – or 'stewardship' (Kuenkel, 2019) – where actors from different sectors not only focus on solving separate collective action problems, but engage in collectively catalysing systemic change (Benulic et al., 2021; Hölscher et al., 2019; Kuenkel, 2019). The case of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery programmes – the focus of this paper – provides an opportunity to explore actors' perceptions of the extent to which disruptions – that is, events that stop systems from operating as previously – act as enablers of societal transformations (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020). As argued by Sewell (2005), disruptions can challenge institutions, social structures, modes of power, routines, behaviours and ways of making sense of the world. Similarly, Campbell (2020) notes that the possibility of new ideas taking hold and affecting decision-making is stronger in times of perceived crisis.

3.2 | Ideas and frames

As pointed out above, the study of policy coherence tends to focus on integration between policy sectors and downplay factors of politics and temporality. A growing body of literature however notes that frames and ideas may have a considerable effect on policy (in)coherence (see e.g., Bocquillon, 2018; Lenschow et al., 2018). In order to scrutinise the recovery debate in Sweden and its implications for policy coherence and sustainability transformations, this article views policy coherence as not only instrumental but also political, impacted by vested interests or conflicting ideas (Strambo et al., 2015). This understanding is complemented by a rich literature which distinguishes the effect of ideas on policy (Béland et al., 2007; Blyth, 2002; Gauvin, 2014; Hall, 1997; Hay, 2004). A literature which complements the policy cycle heuristics by allowing us to see the construction and prioritisation of problems that political actors may address (Berger & Luckmann, 1971; Hajer, 1993; Stone, 2012), thereby constituting both a part of agenda-setting, prescription, and legitimisation of action. Further understanding how ideas impact decision- and policymaking, Campbell (1998, 2020) detailed a taxonomy outlining types of ideas and their effects on policy. In his work, he describes concepts in the foreground of the policy debate which, on a cognitive level, manifest as 'programs' (ideas of policy prescriptions that chart a clear and specific course of policy action) and, on a normative level, manifest as 'frames' (ideas as symbols and concepts that legitimise policy solutions). In the example of the Swedish recovery debate, policy prescriptions are perhaps most clearly seen in the arguments outlining proposed policy objectives. However, the ideas linked to such objectives are equally important as they chart a policy course and legitimise policy solutions. The typology shows how different ideas, as either assumptions or prescriptions, have an impact on policy action whilst restricting and demarcating what can be considered useful and legitimate policy solutions. It also recognises the importance of underlying assumptions and their impact on actions and solutions suggested in the policy debate.

To understand how ideas are connected or linked together to form "policy frames" (Bocquillon, 2018, p. 341), we draw on the concept of *framing* (e.g., Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Goffman, 1974; Nisbet, 2009; Rein & Schön, 1993) for our analysis. Framing is frequently applied in media analysis (see e.g., Entman, 2007; Matthes, 2009), and is often used together with, for example, agenda setting to discuss distribution of power (Entman, 2007). Hence, integrating framing with the assumption of ideas as drivers of policy change provides a useful heuristic to our study of the recovery debate in Sweden. The frame concept describes "a central organising idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). As such, this paper uses a broader understanding of the frame concept than in Campbell's typology, to see how ideas are connected, but also to discuss what seems to fall outside of the frame. As suggested by the metaphor of a picture frame, the concept accentuates how particular dimensions of a topic are foregrounded in text and talk, while other aspects are downplayed or completely absent. Framing processes thus impact on how we make sense of issues, how we evaluate them, who are seen as key actors and how responsibility is attributed. In addition to mapping existing frames, an important part of a frame analysis consists of reflecting on which frames are missing or are completely excluded from public debate.

4 | METHODS

The empirical material of this paper comprises opinion and debate articles published in the printed Swedish press between February 2020 and June 2021. The articles were identified via the Retriever database using three search strings (originally in Swedish,[1] author translation):

1. (Corona* OR covid*) AND (recovery package* OR recovery*) AND Sweden.
2. (Corona* OR covid*) AND debate AND (recovery* OR support* OR green*) AND Sweden.
3. (Corona* OR covid*) AND debate AND ("transition" OR transformation*) AND green AND Sweden.

The three search strings generated over 300 articles. This selection was manually reviewed for relevance (content concerning recovery), but also for duplication (as certain opinions were published by multiple newspapers). The manual review resulted in the selection of 189 articles, published from the beginning of March 2020 to the end of May 2021 (see Appendix A for full corpus). The majority of the relevant articles were published between March 2020 and end of May 2020. Following this time period, around 10 or less articles on pandemic recovery measures were published (see Figure 1), it was hence deemed that data saturation had been reached and there was little relevance in including articles beyond May 2021. Table 1 outlines sources and authors.

The articles were summarised and coded using the NVivo software. Addressing the first research question and focusing on the understudied political and temporal aspect of policy coherence for sustainability transformations we drew on 'analytical categories' to identify arguments that 'chartered a course' for policy action (ideas of policy prescriptions), how ideas were used to legitimise policy solutions (policy frames) and how these ideas were connected or linked to a grander issue (framing). Categories were identified a priori as relating to ideas of policy, actors responsible and/or targeted, leadership and instruments used to legitimise policy options, ideas of a transition/transformation, or temporal references. Allowing for flexibility, inductively identified categories were also included based on the analysis of the articles such as the mentioning of secondary objectives and policy linkages. Similarly, previous a priori categories with little or no support in the texts were removed. To identify the specified categories, the authors used analytical questions to guide the analysis, these were not related to the research questions. The analytical questions and categories are listed in Table 2 below.

As an example of the coding, in the following statement: "Sweden has a good starting position to speed up the transition to a more sustainable society. We can thus become a role model and contribute to the sustainable transition in the rest of the world" (#076),[2] we can answer questions regarding objectives (transition to a more sustainable society) and leadership (become a role model). One article could contain multiple codes in different categories.

5 | RESULTS

Using a priori and inductive categories, Table 3 shows all NVivo codes under respective category, as well as the number of articles that were coded (prescription for policy action or legitimising ideas).

A divide could be seen between articles containing ideas of a green economic recovery as opposed to the ones prescribing a more conventional economic recovery. Such ideas of 'greening' growth and suggesting synergies thereof is in line with the understanding of the emergence of the environmental- or greening of the state within liberal capitalist states (see e.g., Eckersley, 2020; Hausknost, 2020). These articles differed greatly regarding ideas of transformations and temporality (see Table 4), which would indicate the presence of one more transformative and one more reactive frame within the debate, or an imaginative frame versus a prosaic one (Dryzek, 2013). Ideas of temporality in the conventional 'reactive' frame focused on the passing nature of the pandemic whereas the green articles contained ideas on building back better or addressing two parallel crises (the pandemic and the climate crisis), thereby indicating a more 'synergistic' nature. Given the clear differences in codes relating to temporality and ideas of transformation we will refer to these two frames as synergistic and reactive. The reactive 'conventional recovery' articles were more prominent earlier in the debate (March–April 2020) than the synergistic 'green recovery' which became more prevalent in May 2020 (see Figure 1).

There were similarities between authors of the 'synergistic' and 'reactive' articles regarding industry, research, NGOs, civil society,

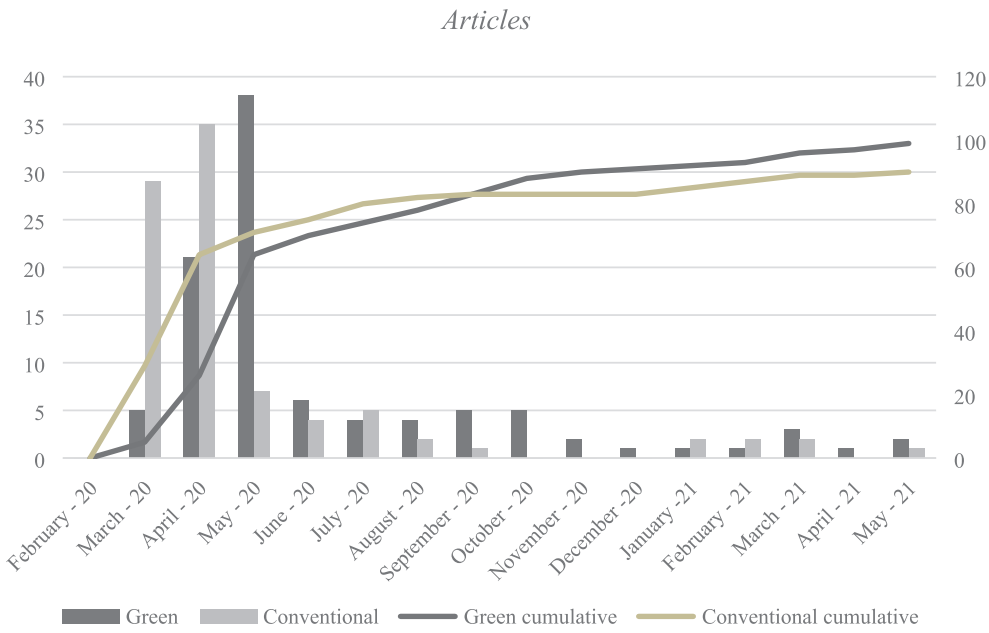

FIGURE 1 Number of articles coded as green and conventional recovery per month, February 2020 – May 2021. Conventional recovery was mentioned in more articles up until May 2020, when green recovery was more frequently mentioned instead. The figure also contains a cumulative graph showing 99 articles coded as green and 90 articles as conventional. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 1 Overview of articles included in the corpus.

Source (press)	Articles
Regional	115
National	63
Union/interest	11
Authors	
Politicians (left to right)	87
Industry	38
Researchers	27
NGOs	17
Civil society	8
Journalists	7
Politics and research	1
Politics and industry	1
International organisation	1
Public institution	1

TABLE 2 Analytical categories.

Enquiry	Category
What are the central objectives advocated for in the article?	Primary objective(s)
What are the objectives included alongside the central objectives of the article?	Secondary objective(s)
Which actors are mentioned in the text?	Responsible actor(s), target group(s)
How is leadership seen or understood?	Leadership
Which means or instruments are mentioned in relation to policy objectives?	Instrument(s)
How is transformation or transition seen or understood?	Transition/ transformation
Which timeframes are seen as relevant in relation to the policy prescriptions invoked?	Temporal reference
Which existing policies or initiatives are brought up in the article?	Policy linkages

journalists, or international organisations. However, there were differences in terms of political affiliations. The national governing parties during the investigated timeframe – the Swedish Social Democrats and the Green Party – were actively involved in publishing debate and opinion pieces containing green ideas, whereas authors from the opposition party, the Conservative Party, mentioned fewer references to a green recovery or ideas which could be coded as green (e.g., 'sustainability', 'combat climate change', etc.). This result would indicate a difference in authorship and presented ideas between the centre-left parties and conservative-right wing parties, which could suggest the presence of actor clusters around synergistic and reactive ideas and frames (cf. Hajer, 1993 or Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). See Table 5 for an overview of authors.

5.1 | A synergistic frame and a green transition

When looking closer into the demarcation between articles coded as 'green' or 'conventional', a clearer frame emerges regarding the ideas of 'green transitions'. These ideas were only brought up in the articles coded as green, and similarly contained clear ideas of transformation and temporality legitimising policy solutions. Green transition was brought up in 46 articles by different actor groups – industry representatives, researchers, journalists, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and members of the public, but only centre to left politicians. In these articles, the ideas laid out were synergistic, for example, "support for a green transition will be a defining part of jumpstarting the economy again" (#052). We have differentiated between ideas related to transitions/transformations in separate

TABLE 3 Categories and codes.

Objectives	Coded articles
Save and generate new jobs	55
Green transition	46
Increase welfare	41
Support a specific sector	38
Remove vulnerabilities	35
Achieve self-sufficiency	27
Save companies	24
Combat climate change	19
Increase competitive advantage	19
Ensure national priorities	17
Ensure growth	10
Recovery through globalisation and trade	5
Secondary objectives	
Combat inequality	27
Limit emissions	21
Become fossil free	16
Increase employment	8
Achieve welfare	8
Protect biodiversity	3
Responsible actor	
Government	77
Regions and municipalities	16
EU	8
Industry	5
Citizens	4
International leaders	4
National bank	3
Target groups	
Vulnerable groups	23
Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)	17
Companies	8
'Ordinary people' and taxpayers	6
Transformations	
Transition of production	17
Structural transformation	14
Planned transition	8
Not a structural transformation	4
Temporal references	
'Build back better' (laying the foundation for a better future)	44
Passing nature of the pandemic	35
Crisis as an opportunity	34
Historical analogies	32
Urgency	24
Parallel crises	22
Future generations	20
Pandemic now – climate later	16
Short- and long-term focus	16
Uncertainty	11
Instruments/means	
Infrastructure investment	29
Recovery through a plan/strategy	27
Conditioned support	25
Welfare investments	23
Recovery through solidarity	23
Investment in renewable energy	20
Less bureaucracy	16
Housing policies	15
Green jobs	11
Remove fossil fuel subsidies	8
Redistributional policies	7
Leadership	
Collaboration	48
Fast decisions	47
Political agency	31
Lead by example	25
Political agreement	17
Clarity	16
Policy linkages	
Paris Agreement	15
European Green Deal	12
National climate targets	11
Fossil Free Sweden	11
EU Trading Scheme (EU ETS)	8
The 2030 Agenda	6
Total	**189**

NVivo codes (see Tables 3 above and 6 below) and ideas of a green transition as a policy prescription.

Green transition was mentioned in relation to both economic and environmental ideas, but also in connection with social objectives of welfare and equality. The inclusion of social objectives of welfare and combatting inequality, together with ideas of a competitive advantage stemming from a fossil-free recovery, adds to the synergetic nature of the frame. It also suggests that a green transition could be legitimised partly on grounds of justice and fairness. As such, this framing functions as an adhesive, attaching different policy objectives to each other, in line with Bocquillon's (2018) observation of policy frames as organising ideas gluing different issues together.

Although the frame portrays a synergetic relationship between environmental, economic and social objectives much in line with an environmental discourse of sustainability and ecological

TABLE 4 Two emerging potential frames.

	Main objectives	Responsible actor(s)	Target group (s)	Instruments	Leadership	Transformations	Temporal references	Policy linkages
Green 'synergistic'	Enable a green transition, remove vulnerabilities, achieve self-sufficiency, save and generate new jobs, increase welfare and increase competitive advantage. Objectives listed in connection with the primary objectives were: combat inequality, limit emissions and become fossil free.	Government	Vulnerable groups	Infrastructure investment, conditioned support, renewable energy investments, recovery strategy, welfare investments	Collaboration, lead by example, fast decisions	Structural transformation, transition of production	Build back better (laying the foundation for a better future), crisis as an opportunity, parallel crises (pandemic and climate change)	Paris Agreement, European Green Deal
Conventional 'reactive'	Save and generate new jobs, support a specific sector, increase welfare, save companies, remove vulnerabilities. Objectives listed in connection with the primary objectives were: achieve welfare, increase employment.	Government	Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), vulnerable groups	Solidarity, less bureaucracy, welfare investments, recovery strategy	Fast decisions, collaboration, need for political strength and agency	-	Passing nature of the pandemic, historical analogies, urgency	-

	Green 'synergistic'	99	Conventional 'reactive'	90
Source	Regional	54	Regional	61
	National	35	National	28
	Interest	10	Interest	1
Authors	Industry	19	Industry	21
	Research	15	Research	13
	NGO	5	NGO	9
	Civil society	5	Civil society	3
	Journalist	5	Journalist	2
	International organisation	1	Public organisation	1
	Politics	**49**	**Politics**	**41**
	Swedish Social Democratic Party	17	Conservative Party	12
	Green Party	14	Swedish Social Democratic Party	7
	Centre Party	7	Miscellaneous	6
	Left Party	4	Liberals	5
	Liberals	4	Centre Party	3
	Sweden Democrats	1	Christian Democrats	3
	Miscellaneous	1	Sweden Democrats	3
	Conservative Party	1	Left Party	2
	Christian Democrats	0	Green Party	0

TABLE 5 List of sources of articles and authors represented in the corpus.

modernisation (Dryzek, 2013) and the emergence of the environmental- and green state (Eckersley, 2020; Hausknost, 2020), the outcome-oriented ideas of policy solutions on how such a transition should be carried out were less consistent. For example, ideas about a structural transformation, a planned transition and a transition of production were all brought up in connection with a green transition. In terms of what type of leadership was sought after, the articles mentioned collaboration, fast decisions, and the need to lead by example. Leading by example was almost exclusively mentioned in the green recovery articles. This would suggest that 'leading by example' is used to legitimise a policy solution, in this case not only on the grounds of its synergistic appeal (linking social, environmental, and economic objectives) but also by appealing to the possibility of Sweden becoming a 'frontrunner' in the transition to a sustainable society, whilst contributing to the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda. Similar ideas used to legitimise a green recovery could be seen in the emphasis on removing vulnerabilities, achieving self-sufficiency, and increasing competitive advantage – objectives which were very much present in the articles coded as 'green' but less so in the remaining ones (see Table 4).

The most frequent temporal reference made in connection to a green transition was to 'build back better' (25 out of 46 articles), which emphasised the need to prioritise climate goals and sustainability goals in parallel with other types of recovery after the pandemic. However, several green articles also brought up the need to focus on the pandemic now and the climate later – which seems to stand in contrast to the idea of parallel crises. The uncertainty of what to prioritise and when seems inherent to the temporal references present in the synergistic articles. Coupling this to the synergistic appeal of a green transition – where certain objectives were seen as an outcome of a transition, such as combatting inequality or limiting emissions – suggests that there are underlying assumptions of present measures leading to future synergies without specifying what to prioritise or when. Similarly, temporal ideas linked to the objective of combatting climate change were somewhat contradictory, ranging from an understanding of parallel crises (pandemic and climate change) to the need to focus on urgent socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic first and tackle the climate crisis afterwards. Ideas of urgency and long-term planning were also co-mingled in the articles where climate change was highlighted as an issue.

5.2 | Transitions and transformations

Regarding green transition, we use the word 'transition' to translate the Swedish word '*omställning*', although many aspects of '*omställning*' may in theory be considered transformative – for instance the connection to becoming fossil free and reaching net-zero GHG emissions by 2045, as stipulated by the Swedish Government. 'Transition' is also used in this instance because it marks a type of gradual shift or change in a current structure, for example, through infrastructure investments – which was suggested in many articles mentioning a green transition – rather than a complete transformative change of societal structures. Within the synergistic frame, ideas related to a transition of production, planned transition and the need for a structural transformation were all present. Transition and transformation were however used synonymously in the articles, and context is crucial when differentiating. Table 6 reflects such nuances and shows

TABLE 6 Transitions and transformations.

	Quotations
Not a structural transformation	"This is not a structural transformation but a pandemic." (#003); "This is not proof of a fast transition." (#062)
Transition of production	"Opportunity for companies to transition to more sustainable products." (#019); "There is a need for changed production." (#040); "Industry should transform production and become fossil free, increasing their competitive advantage." (#085); "We need to transition to climate-smart production through innovation and circular economy." (#125); "Fast transition of industry and infrastructure to a fossil-free society." (#187).
Planned transition	"A long-term improved environment and slowed climate change can only be achieved through a thoroughly planned sustainable transition, not because of a pandemic." (#108); "Climate transition should not occur under the type of turmoil and drama that the pandemic represents." (#122); "A plan for the transition of agriculture to fossil free should be laid out – and should include support for biofuels, research and innovation." (#153).
Structural transformation	"We have the biggest opportunity to change the system – for a climate transition." (#039); "To save the global growth economy in its current form is not reasonable, not for humanity or for the environment" (#069); "We need to rebuild the entire machinery. In the light of the crisis, our society seems absurd." "The recovery politics cannot be a conserving force, but should rather stimulate a much demanded structural transformation." (#110); "The recovery provides an enormous opportunity to take a first step to contribute towards a sustainability principle to not risk getting stuck in another hamster wheel to restore growth numbers." (#128).

example of coded quotations. 'Transition of production', for example, included ideas of industry becoming fossil free and providing more sustainable products. The theme 'planned transition' showed similar arguments but placed a greater emphasis on transitions or transformations not occurring in turbulent or chaotic times. The quotations coded under 'structural transformation' also mentioned the need for transition, but with added ideas of a systems change or restructuring of society.

Ideas of structural transformations were most prominently articulated in articles mentioning the climate crisis. Ideas of transformations were more clearly present in the synergistic articles than in the reactive ones. Hence, the prospect of the recovery as an opportunity for transformative change was largely absent in the articles that did not have a green focus (see Table 4).

5.3 | Reactive frame – Or business as usual?

In the debate, times of uncertainty seemed to invoke a sense of reclaiming agency by, for example, alluding to the passing nature of the pandemic, or by drawing on historical analogies of 'it has been done before, we can do it again'. In the reactive frame, the idea of the passing nature of the pandemic was the most frequent, mentioned in 21 out of 90 articles. This can be compared to the idea of 'crisis as an opportunity', which was common in the green articles but only present in eight of the articles arguing for a conventional economic recovery.

Temporality could also be seen in policy prescriptions, where the most common idea was to urgently save jobs (32 articles) and companies (16 articles), as well as to focus on a specific sector for recovery (26 articles). There were some differences in authorship between the reactive and synergistic articles; for instance, representatives of the political opposition at the time (the Conservative Party) were more frequently articulating reactive ideas, suggesting a type of political polarisation around certain idea clusters (cf. Hajer, 1993 or Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). The reactive articles also raised the idea that leadership should be characterised by fast decisions (26 articles), ideas which were less present in synergistic articles.

The idea of transformation is another point which speaks to the presence of a reactive frame. For example, the conventional recovery articles contained ideas outlining how the pandemic was not the right time for a structural transformation (four articles). Only a few articles mentioned the need for transformations (one) or a transition of production (four). When transition was mentioned, this was described as something that occurs through rigorous planning or 'only' in the shape of a gradual transition to a less vulnerable status of a certain sector. Hence, the prospect of the recovery as an opportunity for transformative change was largely absent in within the reactive frame (see Table 4).

5.4 | Outside of the frame

Central to the method of frame analysis is not only what fits into the analogy of the picture frame, but also what falls outside of it. We have already pointed out the synergistic frame articulated in the green transition articles, so it was particularly surprising to see that the synergistic and indivisible 2030 Agenda was only mentioned in six out of 189 articles, and only by the parties in the Government coalition at the time (the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party) and non-governmental organisations (development cooperation, non-profit think tank). Since the 2030 Agenda promises transformative potential in its use as a platform for action and in achieving policy coherence between sustainability objectives, the absence of explicit references in the articles is striking. Specific objectives and means for recovery could however be linked to specific SDGs, for instance the focus on renewable energy (SDG7 *Affordable and Clean Energy*, in particular targets 7.1 and 7.2) and infrastructure (SDG9 *Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure*, especially targets 9.1 and 9.4, with potential linkages to

a number of SDGs such as SDG8 on *Decent Work and Economic Growth* and environmental SGDs and climate objectives (SDG13)).

Another aspect which was almost non-existent in the recovery debate was ideas regarding biodiversity. These were addressed in only three articles out of 189 and then only mentioned as a secondary objective, presented as an aspect that would benefit from a green transition. Similarly, more concrete means such as 'halt deforestation' were only mentioned in two out of 189 articles, and only by researchers.

6 | DISCUSSION

Answering the first part of our first research question, we identified a synergistic frame specifically linked to the policy objective of a *green transition*, and a reactive frame with a focus on short-term issues (in line with previous research on policy priorities in times of crisis [e.g., Lenschow et al., 2018]). We will now discuss the implications of such findings on policy coherence for sustainability transformations, and if this had any effect on government priorities.

6.1 | Synergistic for whom?

Our results show the presence of a synergistic frame in which environmental, economic, and social objectives can all be reached under the banner of a 'green transition'. This however, masks the much needed debate on policy priorities and transparency regarding winners and losers of government initiatives. Power and politics, highlighted as key considerations when shaping pathways to sustainability transformations (Blythe et al., 2018; Fazey et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2017; Stirling, 2014), are hence downplayed in the recovery debate – in favour of a synergistic idea, where a 'green recovery' is seen to have future positive effects on equality and welfare rather than making such objectives imminent priorities. This stands in contrast to international debates on how to build back better, where a 'just transition' is a key concept brought to the fore by multiple actors and organisations including the OECD (2020), business networks (We Mean Business coalition, 2020) and the UN General Assembly (De Schutter, 2020). Such a focus on distributional aspects and inclusion is vital for the 2030 Agenda's focus on 'leaving no one behind' as it recognises the need to go beyond simplistic win-win rhetoric in policy coherence framing. Our empirical material however shows that the debate contained little or no ideas regarding how to prioritise or reconcile between different policy actions, as well as an overall lack of ideas regarding how to carry out policy solutions and which consequences this would have for different societal groups.

Since transformations create winners and losers (Blythe et al., 2018; Carley & Konisky, 2020), we argue that a just transformation frame, with a focus on highlighting "who gets what, why and with what consequences" (Castree, 2010, p. 1734), would be warranted in debates on green recovery that strive to relate pandemic recovery packages to efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda. In the Swedish recovery debate, however, references were only made to the welfare and equality gains of a green transition – inevitably leading us to ask whether the green transition is becoming just, or a just transition became green in the presence of such a disruptive event.

The ideas articulated in the synergistic frame would have direct implications on the environmental SDGs. However, these were mentioned as a way not only to ensure a better environment but also to achieve competitive advantage and a stronger economy – thereby signalling an adoption of the type of 'win-win' and synergistic ideas that are associated with the 2030 Agenda, ecological modernisation and the emergence of the green- or environmental state (Dryzek, 2013; Eckersley, 2020; Hausknost, 2020). Interestingly, in line with Sweden's ambition to become a 'fossil-free welfare state', notions of a carbon-neutral or fossil-free economy were visible in the recovery debate; however, these were more often linked to economic primary imperatives and were secondary to welfare objectives.

6.2 | Is there a temporal hierarchy of policy priorities?

Both articles coded as reactive and synergistic contained implicit ideas of future positive synergies. For example, investments in infrastructure may (primarily) contribute to a more resilient economy but could also bring benefits for the environment and the welfare of the country. The challenge, as highlighted by the results, is that the timeframe of creating synergies remains undefined. In the absence of time-related factors in the literature on policy coherence and environmental policy integration (e.g., Candel & Biesbroek, 2016; Carbone, 2008; Persson & Runhaar, 2018; Peters, 2018), the clear presence of ideas concerning a temporal hierarchy of policy prescriptions and solutions in the debate is striking.

The recovery debate contained ideas on how the economic crises was imminent and acute, whereas the climate and the environment often were regarded as a 'future priority'. This indicates an implicit understanding of when policy priorities should be made; for instance, only a few articles mentioned how the looming economic recession and climate efforts should be tackled in parallel efforts, whereas the majority seemed to harbour an understanding of a 'temporal hierarchy' for policy priorities and coherence. The lack of research on the temporal aspects impacting on policy coherence, especially in the light of the both short- and long-term priorities embedded in the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement, as well as the clear framing of ideas in this research, should constitute a call for further scrutiny. Policy coherence as an attribute promoting synergies should hence be defined in relation to timeframes, perhaps especially given the lack of policymaker guidance on how to seek coherence under time pressure (CCIC, 2018; OECD, 2016).

The framing of temporal priorities may contribute to limiting policy options by legitimising which priorities should be made when, thereby – perhaps unintentionally – creating a type of hierarchy. As we have seen in the debate, this type of temporal hierarchy frames environmental concerns as future rather than imminent, especially in the presence of short-term challenges such as job losses. This may have considerable

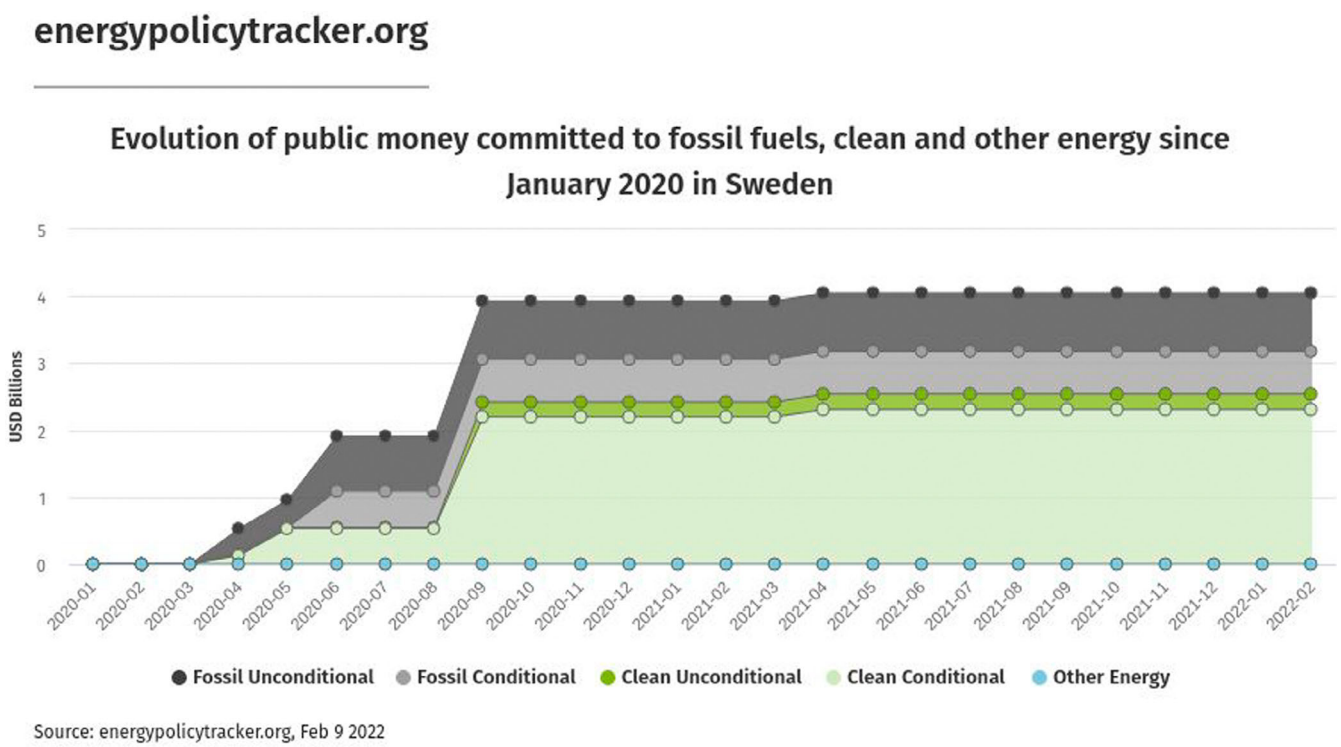

FIGURE 2 Figure from Energy Policy Tracker showing the evolution of public money committed to fossil fuels, clean energy and other energy since January 2020. Published with permission from EneryPolicyTracker.org under the Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA4.0 licence, accessed in February 2022. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

implications on policy, especially when it comes to decision-making in shorter time windows, where a temporal hierarchy risks legitimising policy options with a conservative rather than catalytic effect or further locking investments in a path dependency. Consequently, it may undermine transformative potential of disruptive societal events. Moreover, our findings further suggest the presence of actor clusters around certain ideas (cf. Hajer, 1993 or Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Such actor clusters may create polarisation around temporal priorities and thereby risk legitimising reactive measures at the expense of more transformative ones. Similarly, the temporal aspects of societal transformations are often under-researched, although the different conceptions of the pace and time scales of transformations are among the key dimensions that characterise different approaches to transformative change in practice (Feola, 2015; Linnér & Wibeck, 2019).

We argue that ideas of a temporal hierarchy, and the actors that convey them, may have a considerable effect on the coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the climate goals as stipulated in the NDCs. However, the temporal aspects of the two agendas' transformative potential, as well as the effects the differing timeframes may have on policy coherence, are largely unexplored and merit further analysis.

6.3 | Different forces at play – Did the crisis become an opportunity?

Addressing our second research question, we can contrast our results above with the policy decisions made on the economic recovery packages and the extent to which they were indeed 'green'. Efforts have been made globally to track the greenness of recovery at national level (UNEP, 2020).[3] Looking at Sweden, a couple of observations can be made.

First, assessments agree that the recovery spending had a small net positive effect on climate objectives, or on the green transition more broadly. A large share of government spending after the pandemic outbreak was focused on 'relief', which consisted mainly of direct support to companies and public institutions to save jobs and avoid bankruptcies. The Climate Policy Council argued in its 2021 evaluation that such recovery spending, while not green, could help avoid a general economic downturn which could have a negative effect on attitudes to climate investments in the long term (Kuylenstierna et al., 2021). The budget for 2021, brought before parliament in September 2020, had a stronger 'recovery' and 'reform' focus. The Social Democratic and Green Party government called it "a powerful green recovery package". However, the Climate Policy Council estimated that only around 10% had a positive effect on achieving the Swedish climate policy objectives, whereas the Global Recovery Observer tracker estimates a larger share of some 40% (Global Recovery Observatory, 2022). Critique voiced after the main green recovery debate in spring 2020 has focused on the high level of relief support offered to airlines and airports, with unclear green conditionalities, and the fact that EU recovery funds would be used to finance the green spending rather than additional national funds.

Second, while the ideas and calls for a green recovery – which would enhance policy coherence between climate and other societal

objectives – did not lead to ambitious decisions as estimated in the analyses cited above, they seemed to have had an effect on the official framing of the 2021 budget. For example, when looking at the energy sector and government spending, we can also see an introduction over time of green recovery spending, taking place after the ideas were debated in spring 2020 (see Figure 2 from Energy Policy Tracker).

7 | CONCLUSIONS

The disruptive situation of critical pandemic responses and ideas of greening the recovery provided an opportunity to study the ideas influencing policy at a time when outside stressors force priorities and when overcoming policy incoherence confronts the persistent, almost archetypical idea of a conflict between environmental and economic priorities. The international discussion of recovery packages and the evidence from the Swedish debate indicates the presence of two different types of frames for political prioritisation. One the one hand, the synergistic 'build back better' frame urges governments and industry to utilise a recovery in anticipation of the environmental and climate crises (OECD, 2020). On the other hand, another frame emerges whereby the division between policy priorities is stricter and the economy becomes a priority over climate targets. In the Swedish debate, frames emphasising trade-offs that prioritise environmental objectives and frames that address the full spectrum of societal transformations – involving not only technical and economic changes, but also political, social, cultural, and environmental changes – were less prominent. The extent to which the case of Sweden and the lack of explicit references to SDGs is representative of other countries or governance contexts remains to be seen, as more evaluative research on the actual steering effect and transformative potential of the SDGs emerges. Our results indicate that real-world and direct steering effects of the SDGs, in a disruptive event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may be challenged.

That the idea of using the recovery as an opportunity for accelerating transformations was reflected almost exclusively in the climate change articles, and not as part of the general recovery, points to the low uptake of the international calls for sustainability transformations. Based on case studies in Chile, South Africa and Uzbekistan, Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al. (2020) conclude that social tipping alone does not suffice for anticipated societal transformations. The "capacities to navigate the tipping process towards a desirable outcome" are fundamental (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020, p. 12). Their results indicate that the "interplay of cognitive, structural and agency-related capacities throughout all phases of the transformation" is critical (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020, p. 11). The cognitive features include awareness of, a need for, and a desire to, change. While the other capacities might also contribute to the meagre use of the recovery for societal transformations towards decarbonisation (Kuylenstierna et al., 2021) and even more so towards sustainability, our analysis of the media discourse indicates that the required cognitive capacity was still too low to enable a widespread debate and pressure for the pandemic to be the decisive social tipping point.

The growing momentum for the sustainability transformations imperative in international organisations (United Nations, 2015, 2021), and in the science community (IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2018), has saturated poorly into the Swedish general debate, despite the Government's ambitions to be a sustainability leader and plans for Sweden to become the first fossil-free welfare state. This indicates profound challenges and the considerable length of time required for the sustainability transformation calls to become part of the public discourse.

The temporal synergies discussed in the articles are mirrored in the contested understanding of overcoming policy incoherence through synergies, opening up a broad discussion of how synergetic effects can be evaluated and understood. The ideas of synergies in policy development may thus be a contested field – as the results of this article show, there seems to be an inherent understanding of temporal priorities – with the idea of short-term priorities in one policy sector causing future synergetic effects in others. However, in the absence of clear timeframes, the ex-ante evaluation of such synergetic effects becomes abstract at best and arbitrary at worst. It also creates a risk of pushing the need for stricter climate and environmental policies onto future policy agendas instead of making the 'tough decisions' in the present. Therefore, while the synergetic policy frame largely glues the objectives together rhetorically, this idea struggles to materialise in politics' temporal priorities of a swift recovery, bouncing back to the state of the economy before the pandemic. As such, this view of re-building society corresponds poorly to the idea of using the recovery initiatives as a window of opportunity to lay the foundations for a more sustainable society.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ENDNOTES

[1] (1) (Corona* OR covid*) AND (återhämtningspaket* OR återhämtning*) AND Sverige; (2) (Corona* OR covid*) AND debatt AND (återhämtning* OR stöd* OR grön*) AND Sverige; (3) (Corona* OR covid*) AND debatt AND ("omställning" OR transform*) AND green AND Sverige

[2] Appendix A contains a list of the full corpus with articles listed in publication order, from #001 to #189.

[3] See continuously updated trackers at https://www.energypolicytracker.org/, https://recovery.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/tracking/ and https://www.greenrecoverytracker.org/.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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