

**State Ideologies, State-led Gender Policies and the Role of Zhenotdel in the Soviet Society:  
Experiences of the 1930s**

*Devlet İdeolojileri, Devlet GÜdümlü Toplumsal Cinsiyet Politikaları ve Sovyet Toplumunda*

*Zhenotdel'in Rolü: 1930'ların Deneyimi*

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**Abstract:** This study discusses gender equality appearances in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the time period between 1928 when the first five-year plan was implemented and the end of the 1930s. Investigating to what extent gender equality goals were achieved in the Soviet society gives us the relationship between gender perspectives and ideology, state-led policies, and women's and men's experiences in the stated period. The Zhenotdel, the women's department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party, is one of the most crucial institutions to conduct state-led gender policies in the USSR. The study, therefore, starts with the Zhenotdel's gender policies and further investigates the Zhensektor, a woman section of the Party. The aims of both institutions are not only women's issues but also matters concentrated on state-led policies and ideologies in the Soviet society. However, Stalin's declaration of "Socialism in One Country" brought harsh masculine policies and a state-led ideology prioritized that women's emancipation and gender equality. Therefore, in that period, gender equality in Soviet society could not be achieved.

**Keywords:** USSR, Gender Equality, Zhenotdel, State Ideology, State-led Policies.

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**Öz:** Bu çalışma, ilk beş yıllık planın uygulandığı tarih olan 1928'den 1930'ların sonuna kadar Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Birliği'ndeki (SSCB) toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği görünümünü ele almaktadır. Sovyet toplumunda toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği hedeflerine ne ölçüde ulaşıldığını ele almak, belirtilen dönemde toplumsal cinsiyet perspektifleri ile devlet ideolojisi, devlet güdümlü politikalar ile kadın ve erkek arasındaki ilişkiyi ortaya koymaktadır. Komünist Parti Merkez Komitesi Sekreterliği'nin kadın birimi olan Zhenotdel, SSCB'deki devlet güdümlü toplumsal cinsiyet politikalarını yürüten o dönemki en önemli kurumlardan biriydi. Bu nedenle çalışma, Zhenotdel'in toplumsal cinsiyet politikalarıyla başlayıp; daha sonra Parti'nin kadın kolu olarak kurulan Zhensektor'la devam etmektedir. Her iki kurumun amacı da yalnızca Sovyet toplumundaki kadın sorunlarını ele almak değil, aynı zamanda Sovyet toplumundaki devlet güdümlü politikaları ve ideolojileri sürdürmektir. Ancak, Stalin'in "Tek Ülkede Sosyalizm" beyannamesi, maskülen politikaları beraberinde getirmiş ve devletçi ideoloji, kadınların özgürleşmesini ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğinin sağlanmasını öncelmiştir. Bundan dolayı bahsi geçen yıllarda Sovyet toplumunda toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği istenildiği şekliyle hayata geçirilememiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** SSCB, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği, Zhenotdel, Devlet İdeolojisi, Devlet Güdümlü Politikalar.

## 1. Introduction

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is one of the key political actors that influenced the international political system and related socio-economic and socio-cultural structures during the twentieth century. There have been some discussions and a rich literature on the Soviet ruling system, its policies, experience, leaders, and so forth. The influences of the socialist trends on the USSR are a difficult point to understand within any certain period and/or concept. Efforts on contemplating past Soviet experiences and practices not only respond to intellectual concerns but also bring forward some opinions that people currently think over. The development of gender equality in the Soviet society is one of these issues to understand its tracks in modern political and social life.

The importance of gender equality in Soviet society can be associated with three aspects. Firstly, finding the tracks of gender equality in the Soviet era provides the knowledge and information to compare it with other states. Secondly, tackling the experiences and practices on gender equality in the USSR contributes to the relationship between gender perspectives and the Cold War ideologies. Another factor is to build up a linear gender equality discussion from the USSR to Russian Federation, and the former Soviet republics. Based on these aspects, the aim of this study is to debate to what extent gender equality was achieved in the early period of the Soviet society. This paper focuses on the time period between 1928 when the first five-year plan was implemented and the end of the 1930s, the Pre-World War II era. Investigating gender equality and measuring its successful and unsuccessful aspects in this period would be able to give us more comprehensive opinions about its implementation, with ideology, state-led policies, and women's and men's experiences.

The paper consists of three main sections first of which is based on the theoretical background of the study. Within the section, gender equality and social structure are introduced. Secondly, the *Zhenotdel*, the women's department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party, is discussed briefly to draw a historical background. In the next section, the results and findings related to labour policy are put forward with an emphasis on ideology, state-led policies, and the experiences of women and men experiences concerning the stated period. The findings of the study are discussed in detail with an emphasis on the theoretical frame of the study. The relevant research question is addressed by exploring a range of secondary data. Thus, this study is desk-based for the most part. Secondary sources such as articles, books, and web-based materials would be consulted.

Before moving to the theoretical background section, it should be stated that defining gender equality and measuring it within a historical context can be differentiated, but as an overall claim, gender equality can be interpreted as a state not affected by sexes that define having access to rights and opportunities. Undoubtedly, framing gender equality can be done using its contradiction and gender inequality as well. Debates on gender equality in the light of queer gender identities will not be included, and mainly men's and women's practices and experiences of gender equality will be discussed in the present study.

## 2.Theoretical Background: Gender Equality and Social Structure

Finding an answer to the question of what gender equality means can be an easy statement to make, but decoding the term with other concepts and measuring the level of gender equality shows that it's difficult to understand and make progress. As a twenty-first-century trend, many organizations and countries are interested in gender equality and work towards improving the status of gender equality at all levels: local, national, and international.

According to the United Nations official documents (United Nations, 2002), gender equality is defined as a goal accepted by both international organizations and governments, and it is enshrined in international documents and commitments. As stated in the UN sustainable development goals, “gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” (United Nations, 2023). Similarly, the Council of Europe (2023) also describes gender equality as “gender equality entails equal rights for women and men, girls and boys, as well as the same visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation, in all spheres of public and private life. It also implies equal access to and distribution of resources between women and men.” Gender equality can be defined as the equal rights and opportunities for women and men in all aspects of society, including economic participation and decision-making. When differences in behaviours and goals arise, it is crucial to equally value and support the needs of both genders (Gender Equality Division Department of Justice and Equality, 2017). These official definitions are just one moderate definition of gender equality whereas there are many kinds of gender equality concepts.

To put forward the relation among feminism, gender equality and women’s rights, a brief women’s rights discussion is introduced and then gender equality in the light of social structure theory is discussed. From the liberal point of view, the main problems with gender equality are educational freedom and women’s integration into male institutions and public life. The way to deal with gender equality is through legislative reforms (Scott, 1988; Tong, 2014). Regarding the Marxist theory, problems under gender inequality are class oppression, elimination of private ownership by means of women into the economy, and social care whereas the socialist concept’s solution for gender equality is making a revolution (Tong, 2014; Arat, 2015). Looking from the radical feminists’ perspective, gender oppression creates gender inequality. Elimination of male control over women’s bodies and sexuality through separatism is the key concept for radical feminism (Walby, 1990). Gender equality perception of social feminism is based on class oppression, gendered division of labour in public and private spheres. Fighting against capitalism and patriarchy, and similar oppression forms are some ways of solution to defeat gender inequality (Arat, 2015).

The issue of when, how, and where gender equality started is a very crucial question but finding its roots in the depths of history is complicated. The women’s struggle to gain rights towards men can be dated from various years, based on some books and literature published in the mediaeval ages (Donavan, 2012). At that point, there is no need to find a specific milestone for it. So, we tend to open up this process after the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when the Bourgeois revolutions in Europe brought the manufacturing process into the public areas from the family businesses. Men’s participation in labour force formed a distinction between men and women, as a result of this

process equality, freedom and so forth ideas emerged and human rights theory started developing in the favour of women (Berkday, 2010). However, as a collective campaign, the first wave of feminism is the one which brings the political rights of women that occurred in various countries from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 1970s is the time when the second wave of the feminist movement has arisen. Simon de Beauvoir, who wrote *The Second Sex*, built up a bridge connecting these two feminist processes, with her ideas (Walters, 2005; Çakır, 2007). Women's status in society as other is thought beyond the pressures of class, race and so forth in this view.

The usage of the concept of social structure can differ from tight and complicated versions. While Piaget, Althusser, and Lévi-Strauss use complicated versions of social structure, there are many more various versions whereas anything that shows a perceptible model at all is called a structure (Connell, 1987). Initiatives to decipher a social structure start by analysing institutions because in most cases the constraints on social practices become functional with a vast amount of social institutions. Regarding gender relations as a social structure, the works of Juliet Mitchell and Gayle Rubin concentrate on the institution of kinship as the cross-cultural basis of sex inequality (Connell, 1987: 92). The exchange of women among men in Strauss's kinship concept is acknowledged as the subjection of women Mitchell and Rubin. According to Mitchell's view, the exchange of women and the patriarchal social order were cultural universals since the capitalist age, and they do not need them anymore. By doing that, Mitchell endeavours to reintroduce history and practice and saves the rationality of feminism (Connell, 1987: 93). It was a very important argument in the 1970s and referred to an irrational statement of struggle towards patriarch.

The existence and formation of the structure through practical implementation have been discussed in the literature. The theory of structuration of Anthony Giddens (1986) manacles structure and practice together and claims that human practice assumes social structure as a given concept. The structure founded and developed by practice is inconceivable without practice. Practice is also not likely to be conceived without structure. The adaptation of the duality of structure to social theory by Giddens (1986) also raises two questions. Firstly, the connection of structure and practice was problematized in a logical issue, and as a result of this, he refuses the fact that the possibility of structure's form can change in history. And then, he returns to classical structuralism and utilizes the structure of language.

Juliet Mitchell (1971) separates gender relations into four categories as follows: production, reproduction, socialization, and sexuality. Being a historical component for each category and completions among each category can also produce an internal contradiction. However, Mitchell was criticized due to the reason that production and reproduction are practical models rather than structures (Connell, 1987). Mitchell (1971) put forward two drafts of structure form based on women's subordination. The one related to the division of labour refers to the organization of housework, unpaid and paid work, the creation of men's jobs and women's jobs, discrimination in training and promotion, and so forth. The second structure is associated with authority, control, and coercion: the hierarchies of the state and business, domestic authority, institutional and interpersonal violence, and so on.

At that point, according to Connell (1987), issues of gender in light of institutions and psychology can be intelligible by using the division of labour and power. However, the emotional patterns among people and their practice in everyday life work in a different logic which is likely to answer the questions raised by gender liberation, psychoanalysis, and feminists' arguments on sexuality. Connell (1987) established the theory in three steps. Firstly, she modified the concept of the structure with recent developments which occurred in the theory of practice. Secondly, the single structure of gender relations must be divided into component structures or substructures. Lastly, different kinds of structural analyses produce "sexual division of labour" and "gender order" concepts. According to Connell's view, labour, power, and cathexis are essential elements of any gender regime or gender order. While doing that, she did not need to establish *a priori* bases for the research. For a starting point, there are already intuitive notions of social structure in both role theory and categoricism.

### **3.A Short History of the Zhenotdel**

After the Bolshevik Revolution, attempts to build an institution for women started on December 1918, with commissions for propaganda and agitation among women (Buckley, 1992). Then, these commissions set by party committees were directed by the Zhenotdel, the women's department of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party. The Zhenotdel was the section of the Communist Party assigned to women's affairs in the 1920s. Looking at the purposes of the Zhenotdel, stated by Buckley (1992: 66), the first one is the increase of the party's influence over a large number of peasant and working-class women. To integrate these women into the party, trade unions and cooperative organizations are the second aim. Lastly, by negotiating with trade unions and cooperative organizations, establishing nurseries and dining rooms was necessary through the lack of women's liberation. As Kay (2000: 18) states "...the Zhenotdel could be easily done away with and separate work amongst women or attempts to concentrate attention specifically on women's rights and demands dismissed as a bourgeois feminist diversion from the revolutionary cause."

According to Stites, (1976), achievements of the Zhenotdel can be listed as follows. Many urban women won over to the regime, whereas peasant women eventually acknowledged the regime up to some extent. Then, the Zhenotdel fought against domestic slavery and took some action towards the family code of 1926. Besides that, to increase labour force participation, the Zhenotdel made some progress in teaching women industrial skills and qualifications. Working with Health and Labour commissariats, the Zhenotdel fought against prostitution. However, it continued until 1930. The Zhenotdel was officially dissolved in 1930, on the grounds that all issues related to women in the Soviet society had been solved (Wood, 2021).

#### **3.1. Gender Equality and Ideology**

The Zhenotdel which had worked for the emancipation of women over ten years was closed just two years after as defined as having serious work ahead of it (Buckley, 1992: 108). After the Zhenotdel had closed, under departments of agitation of party committees at republic, krai, oblast, town, and district levels, the Zhensektor, or a women's section was established. The aims of the Zhensektor were not only women's concerns but also matters concentrated on political tasks (Buckley, 1992: 124), however, its existence continued until 1934. While these

structural changes were occurring, as stated by Schrand (2001), the Soviet society experienced an amicable seismic shift in sexual divisions of labour in favour of women. As a consequence of this change, over 10 million women began paid work in the industrial and service sectors of the Soviet economy.

However, Stalin's declaration of "Socialism in One Country" brought harsh masculine policies and regularly undermined efforts to liberate women in that period. This industrialization pace, on the one hand, utilized all party resources to improve heavy industries. On the other hand, money for the construction of cafes, laundries, and so forth was limited. These were deemed essential necessities for the Bolshevik-style women's emancipation (Schrand, 2001).

At that point, the five-year plans that promoted women's participation in paid jobs modelled the ideal attitude of women such as love, honour, and obedience. In this way, it restored traditional gender roles in the society (Reid, 1998). In addition to this point, Ashwin's view explains the structure of traditional gender roles in a different way. Ashwin (2000) mentioned that the communist shift to traditional male authority was identified based on work rather than on private patriarchal power. Therefore, a state-centred development goal has brought with it the state-led ideology, which aims for women's participation in development policies rather than their emancipation.

### **3.2. Gender Equality and the State-led policies**

The first five-year plan employed a vast amount of Soviet people all around the country. Opinions regarding the five-year plan were dissatisfied among women activist's unions and within the party because, in their eyes, the plan ignored women (Schrand, 1999). This problematic environment also raised some questions related to a heavy sector which had been mentioned in the plan. Those women who worked in the light industry also had some displeasure due to the division of labour and wages. It should not be forgotten that these efforts produced a result, the five-year plan for female labour, designed by some women unions and then enacted in 1930 (Goldman, 2002).

According to Goldman (2002), based on the State Planning Commission (Gosplan), many branches of industry, mining, metal, leather, and fur were non-attainable or barely accessible to women. It explained the lack of culture and low-level skills rather than discrimination and constituted an obstacle to women's employment. Despite women's critics towards the state institutions relevant to employment in heavy industry, women were transferred to white-collar and service jobs which men gave up moving up to heavy industry.

The Commissariat of Labour (NKT) reported a slowdown for the second five-year plan. In their projection, the state would confront a significant gap between its demands of labour, which was estimated to increase by 50 percent. The possible increase in the natural way was just 15 percent by the end of 1932. Women's participation in production is a most important necessity because of a large amount of labour source (Goldman, 2002). However, as claimed by Shrand (2001), the enlargement of women in labour force is auxiliary, rather than fully independent one.

These kinds of necessities also brought some regulations on women labour force as women are training and improving their skills and creating exclusive preserves. Quotas were established for each industry ranging from heavy industries to textiles, food and so forth. Looking at the scale of women's participation in the labour force, between 1929 and 1935, almost 4 million women, 1.7 million of whom were working in the industry, were employed. By 1935, 42 percent of industrial workers were women (Goldman, 2001: 69). As a parallel source, the table of women workers in main branches of large-scale industry, in 1929 and 1933, situated in Goldman's (2002) another article can be fruitful to see changes in different labour branches. It should not be forgotten that apart from the light industry, women's participation in the heavy industry is under 30 percent.

While discussing women's emancipation in the labour force, opening an avenue for motherhood and the state's perspective on it can be convenient to comprehend women's status in society. At that point, a quotation from Davies (2011: 91) is introduced "...every girl must be treasured not only as a textile worker, a bold parachute jumper, or an engineer- but also as a future mother. The mother of one child must be treasured as the future mother of eight." Carrying such policies can be identified with patriarchal societal values and additionally associated with world ideologies after World War I and pre-World War II.

### **3.3. Gender Equality and the Experiences of the Soviet Women and Men**

The relations of sexes with the state can be seen as a valuable indicator that shows us their perspective towards each other and the other sex. Therefore, in addition to rules, policies, and ideology discussed before, this informal way could be beneficial. As can be seen clearly from the quotation below, the idea of women's participation in light industry is in the same direction as the army. And the division of labour, light industry, in this case, tries to show how strong women are. This perspective can be associated with the sexual division of the labour force. Moreover, calling Stalin as a father is explicitly likely to be interpreted as rooted patriarchal behaviour.

"We want to say to you comrade Stalin: dear father, friend, and teacher! The army of wife activists in the light industry is great. We are applying all our strength to make it bigger, more united."<sup>1</sup> (Buckley, 2001: 155).

About the quotation below, it can be seen that the women's participation in working arena is still unequal. Non-participation of women at the plenum of factory committee gives us clues relevant to women's relations with both authorities and men.

"The factory director supports us, but this cannot be said about the factory committee. It is true they invite us to meetings, sometimes they give us instructions, but there it ends. We have not once given an account of our work, neither at the workers' meeting nor even at the plenum of the factory committee."<sup>2</sup> (Buckley, 2001: 164).

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation taken from Buckle's paper originally comes from "K vsesoyuznomu soveshchaniyu, vypusk 1", p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation taken from Buckle's paper originally comes from "K vsesoyuznomu soveshchaniyu, vypusk 1", p.30.

In the light of the quotation, deducing either equal or unequal circumstances by sexes can hardly ever be, however, one thing that makes it more valuable. The workers' relations of gladness to jobs seem quite optimistic and proud in this case. One more thing that should be taken into account is the neutrality of sexes which could be made a correlation with heavy industry. Under conditions of heavy industry, workers' unification could be highlighted rather than the sense of sex.

“Working underground, building a metro is very hard work...It is a mine; it's rock, clay, water...There were shifts began at five in the morning. They shut us in at six o'clock in the morning because we walked (to work) through the metro tunnels, and we had to get through before trains began working. So, we began at five in the morning and finished at eight in the evening. There was an hour for lunch. But Stalin gave us a ration. A little roll and 100-500 grams of sausage. And money of course...” (Kiblitckaya, 2000: 59)

Based on the quotation below, the sexual division of the labour force within a family was in favour of men. The role of men relevant to household chores in society could be interpreted more patriarchal structure. Although in our specific example, the man had learned how to deal with chores, later, he continued his previous routines.

“Although women are now legally equal to men, male psychology has not changed. For many women, marriage means a working day equal to a man's, plus another working day at home. Men seldom view marriage as a joint venture. A man I know is a good example. When he married, he couldn't boil water, and he felt imposed upon if his wife asked him to go to the bakery. After his divorce, he lived alone and became a wonderful cook and housekeeper. But when he remarried, he reverted completely to type.”<sup>3</sup> (Sacks, 1976: 128).

#### 4. Discussion

Looking at gender equality from 1928 to the end of the 1930s in the USSR in the light of the social structure concept, it can be seen that institutionalism in that period played a key role in the formation of the state-society relationship, but this formation does not refer to growth in women's organizations and the establishment of gender equality in a broader sense. Such an effective women organization, the Zhenotdel, disappeared just at the beginning of the 1930s. While declaring that women's question was solved by Stalin, women's participation in social and work life did not enlarge properly. Instead, a state-centred social and work life was conducted for women.

As mentioned in the previous section, Mitchell (1971) put forward two drafts of structure forms related to women's subordination. One of them is related to the division of the labour force ranging from unpaid and paid work, the creation of women and men jobs, and so forth. The second one refers to patriarchy, control, domestic authority, and so forth. These structure patterns are likely to identify state-led policies and ideologies on gender equality concerns in the case of the given-time period in the USSR.

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<sup>3</sup> Sacks, 1976: 128. Quotation original taken from Yunina, Lyubov, 1971, *Only Romeos*.



Based on the first structure concept, the participation of women in the labour force made some valuable progress in the USSR, but this social phenomenon did not bring women equal salaries to men (Goldman, 2002). Division of the light and heavy industries is also another issue that creates unequal gender roles and attitudes among men and women workers. Improvements in social care, laundry, nursery, and so on provided advantages for women's improvement in society; however, many women had to work in these occupations. In addition to that, another sexual division issue was wages which women were paid less than men (Holdman, 2002). Implementation of quotas for women in different sectors in the 1930s opened some places for women, but it limited ratios rather than equal ones. At that point, it might remember us auxiliary labour force definition by Schrand (2001).

Looking at the second hierarchical pattern in the USSR, patriarchal relations in social and work life are clearly seen. The importance of kinship, emphasized by Mitchell and Rubin (Connell, 1987), as a way that creates inequality between sexes was also apparent in that period. The Soviet rules of the state-led dominated private and public spheres of the society and this circumstance seems to reduce the importance of a sense of kinship. However, it does not mean that the absence of this structure was not fulfilled. The importance of motherhood spread in society by state-led policies (Davies, 2011). Practices in the light of patriarchal relations, family life is explicitly likely to maintain patriarchal roles in the society. At that point, Connel's contribution to the literature "cathexis" could be a beneficial tool to understand the patriarchal relations among the sexes. If we remember the passage of Sacks (1976) above, it gives us clues on gender roles and gender regimes that sustain the continuity of patriarchal values and beliefs. The patriarchal relations also determined the Soviet society at that period.

## **5. Conclusion**

From 1928 to the end of the 1930s, gender equality in the social life and labour sector of the USSR was not achieved. The liberation of women in the society with state-led policies increased the participation of women in the labour force and public areas. However, the distribution of the labour force into sectors showed us who worked in light industry and heavy industry. Wage inequality by gender was another indicator of the gender regime of the state which was in favour of men. The sexist division of labour, therefore, continued to exist despite all state policies. The state-led policies on the development strategies brought harsh masculine policies and regularly undermined efforts to liberate women in that period.

The role of the Soviet state in ensuring gender equality was the mechanism that maintained patriarchal values and beliefs. While making some changes in society, gender inequality policies and norms were regenerated by the state authority all the time. Interactive relations among men, women, and the state were power relations where women were situated in the low level of strata. As a result of the gender policies, it was declared that women's question was solved by Stalin, and women's participation in social and work life increased. However, as the question was not solved state-centred policies continued and the pressures on women also increased.

There are a few sufficient sources that investigated the mono-labour policies of the USSR. However, scrutinising their making process and putting forward possible contradictions by gender will be more convenient. By doing this, the relationship between practice and structure will reveal the reality of gender equality in the Soviet society. As in

almost every society, the gender-based division of labour and gender-blind practices left the women's question unsolved in the Soviet society.

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<b>Makale Bilgi Formu</b>
<b>Yazar(lar)ın Katkıları:</b> Makale iki yazarlıdır. Çalışma tasarımı, veri analizi, ve literatür taramasında her iki yazar da görev almıştır. Ayrıca Gökhan Sırmalı; veri toplama ve yazı taslağı, Muharrem Dođan; içeriğın eleştirel incelenmesi alanlarında katkıda bulunmuştur.
<b>Çıkar Çatışması Bildirimi:</b> Çıkar çatışması yoktur.
<b>Destek/Destekleyen Kuruluşlar:</b> Çalışma herhangi bir kurum tarafından desteklenmemiştir.
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