

Offsetting hybrid threats in Ukraine

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SUMMARY

Ukraine has been the subject of Russia's hybrid aggression for the past eight years. It is embodied in the traditional war that the Kremlin is waging through the alleged annexation of Crimea, the active war in Eastern Ukraine and the concentration of its armed forces along the Russian-Ukrainian border. At the same time, all this time Russia has been attacking Ukraine by fakes, broadcasting toxic narratives, undermining social cohesion, imprisoning Ukrainian citizens and forcing them to obtain Russian passports, including through economic pressure, and energy projects. The main purpose of these actions pursued by Kremlin is to undermine the statehood of Ukraine and return the country to its sphere of influence, as is happening today with Belarus.

Despite these efforts of official Moscow, Ukraine continues to exist as a sovereign state, does not renounce the prospect of integration into the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance, and is reforming its public administration

The policy brief is part of the **project „Eastern Partnership Security Forum”**, that aims to launch the “EaP Security Forum” that will engage nongovernmental and governmental experts from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine in a joint effort to strengthen security resilience of their countries in the areas of cybersecurity, intelligence reform, offsetting hybrid threats, and strengthening the national defense.

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system. This means that the country is able to effectively resist the aggressor in a hybrid war. However, the pressure from Russia, which is not weakening, and the objective and subjective gaps in the state's resilience to hybrid threats remain a challenge to Ukraine's national security, including the information space and Ukrainian media landscape. Kyiv managed to form a system to counteract the Russian disinformation and achieved some progress in this regard. At the same time, the current system still lacks a comprehensive institutional and legal basis for tackling the Russian offensive on many theaters of the information war.

This study tracks key achievements, mistakes and current challenges to strengthening Ukraine's resilience in fighting disinformation. It concerns the actions of the state in the legal, political, and security dimensions, and the steps made by the Ukrainian civil society since 2014. For this purpose, we present key events in the main areas of hybrid threats and Ukraine's response to them. We also pay attention to the factors that helped increase the stability of the state in this area, in particular the support of external actors.

Thus, study shows the crucial role the EU has played in the development of Ukraine's resilience and countering the Russian disinformation. It is important to extend the current bilateral level of cooperation between Ukraine and EU on two other partners inform the Association Trio, as well as take into consideration the Ukrainian lessons learned in the resilience-building process.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of hybrid war / hybrid threats can have a wide range of definitions, as it can be understood as a significant number of measures undertaken to influence the opponent and weaken or even eliminate him from a certain sector of international relations¹. This concept can also encompass the measures of pressure from one subject to another, which could not be imagined as a means of confrontation. Thus, anything can become an instrument of hybrid wars². For the purpose of this study and in the context of the challenges Ukraine faces, hybrid threats are understood as means of influence that weaken a country's defense capabilities through informational, economic, social and political influence in the context of a parallel traditional warfare and armed aggression.

Within this study, we will predominately focus on the informational dimension. Although it is a part and parcel of the hybrid aggression, it deserves a particular attention for several important reasons. Firstly, design formation and propaganda from Kremlin has accompanied all other stages of aggression. Secondly, Ukraine has to foster and strengthen its resilience and develop a comprehensive information security foundation on three core directions. Official Kyiv is to fight against the Russian disinformation both on its sovereign territory, and on occupied territories.

Two tasks differ in terms of narratives and toolkits, and the Ukrainian authorities operate to debunk the Russian malign influence. Moreover, Ukraine has to be active in the media space of Western partner states, where Kremlin employs huge resources to depict Ukraine as failed state, led by war-mongering extreme right nationalists. All three priority directions influence the way the Ukrainian information security is formed.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT - RISKS, THREATS, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES

Russia started the undeclared hybrid war against Ukraine in 2014. This aggression continues to this day. It includes the annexation of territories, support for militants in the temporarily occupied territories, the

¹ Dr. Damien Van Puyvelde. Hybrid war – does it even exist? NATO Review. 7.05.2015. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2015/05/07/hybrid-war-does-it-even-exist/index.html>

² Mark Galeotti. Thinking about Hybrid War and the 'Imagination Race' GLOBSEC. 29.09.2021. <https://www.globsec.org/publications/thinking-about-hybrid-war-and-the-imagination-race3/>

involvement and employment of regular Russian troops, information attacks targeting the state and social cohesion, the illegal detention and torture of Ukrainian citizens, as well as economic and energy pressures.

If prior to 2014, Russia used various means of pressure on Ukraine, after 2014 events, Kremlin resorted to a concentrated hybrid war against its neighbor. All aggressive actions over the past eight years have been accompanied by information attacks on Ukraine, including the spread of disinformation to discredit the Ukrainian state, its political course, defense bodies, and so on. Fake stories were created in Russia throughout 2014-2018 about murders, the looting and rape of civilians in Donbas by the Ukrainian defense forces, about the creation of NATO units in Ukraine, the futility of European integration, Ukraine as a failed state, Crimea's belonging to Russia, the involvement of the Ukrainian authorities in the downing of the MH-17 plane, including about the connection of the terrorist group "Islamic State" to Ukrainian structures and many others.³

Besides the direct media influence in the distribution of Russian propaganda a significant source of false narrative we have to mention is the pro-Russian political parties in Ukraine. In 2021, the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center's research stated that Russia relied heavily on local agents of influence – pro-Russian oligarchs and politicians. The Kremlin has the most obvious connection with the Opposition Platform For Life. Former Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev had repeatedly met with the party's leaders, Viktor Medvedchuk, Yuri Boyko and Vadim Rabinovich⁴. These people act through political instruments, being MPs of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. In particular, they advocate the idea of negotiations and concessions to Russia in order to resolve the conflict and avoid the topic of the return of the temporarily occupied territories. They also operate through their business influence in certain sectors of the Ukrainian economy, including fuel industry. The information dimension of the activity of these agents was manifested in the broadcasting of the channels affiliated with them – 112, NewsOne, ZIK. Experts noted that these media distributed toxic narratives among the most vulnerable groups of the Ukrainian population. In particular, there were reports of Ukraine as a Failed state or a "puppet of the West", of the alleged civil war in the country and the growth of Russophobia there⁵.

During the years of Russian aggression, Ukraine has developed a legal and institutional framework to counter hybrid and direct threats to national security. In 2015, the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine was established. Its main tasks were the development of Ukraine's information space, public strategic communications, information reintegration of the temporarily occupied territories, and the promotion of Ukraine in the world⁶. In 2017, the Doctrine of Information Security was adopted, according to which various state bodies in Ukraine should coordinate their actions in combating disinformation⁷. After that, the Information Security Service was established at the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine.

Also, during those years, government agencies had taken significant steps to increase and strengthen their ability to withstand the Russian influence in the domestic media space. The Law on Transparency of Media Ownership was adopted on September 3, 2015, establishing one of the best legal frameworks in Europe⁸. The State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine has been assigned to lead the work on developing the Strategy for the Development of the Information Space and the Information Security Doctrine.

³ Dmytro Zolotukhin (ed.), "White book of special information operations against Ukraine in 2014–2018" [in Ukrainian], Kyiv, February 2018, https://mip.gov.ua/files/pdf/white_book_2018_mip.pdf

⁴ Бойко і Медведчук знову в Москві: зустрілися з Медведєвим і керівництвом «Газпрому». Радіо Свобода. 11.07.2019. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-boyko-medved%D1%81huk-medvediev/30048820.html>

⁵ "Evolution of Russian narratives about Ukraine and their export to Ukrainian media space," Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, May 2021, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x5y7qQjIFW0sCHwjzJoDU_5LL29WZZd/view

⁶ "Міністерство інформаційної політики України: план на 2016 рік." http://mip.gov.ua/files/Presentation/MIP_activity_2016.pdf

⁷ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №47/2017 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 29 грудня 2016 року «Про Доктрину інформаційної безпеки України». <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/472017-21374>

⁸ "Freedom of Media in Ukraine." Council of Europe Office in Ukraine. 2018. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/freedom-of-media-in-ukraine>

The first stage in securing Ukraine's media space was of a restrictive nature. Since 2017, the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine has restricted the broadcast of 77 Russian TV Channels on cable networks in Ukraine⁹. It is important to bear in mind that, as of 2014, there were 82 Russian cable TV channels in Ukraine. The Ukrainian State Film Agency, in accordance with the norms of the Law of Ukraine on Cinematography, cancelled the state registration of films produced in Russia and released after January 1, 2014.

MAIN POLICY ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES IN COUNTERING HYBRID THREATS

The next significant changes in the legal and institutional field meant to combat hybrid threats occurred after the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. The new Cabinet of Ministers abolished the Ministry of Information Policy, transferring its competencies to the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. In 2020, the National Security Strategy of Ukraine was adopted¹⁰. In particular, the document focuses on the possibility of Russia's confrontation in a hybrid war, where the opponent uses political, economic, informational, psychological, cyber and military means.

The Strategy also aims to build a comprehensive information policy and strategic communications of the state. Later, the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security under the Ministry of Culture and the Center for Countering Disinformation under the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine were established. Both bodies somewhat repeat each other's goals. However, the organization that is part of the Ministry of Culture focuses on the general fight against disinformation and the development of the Ukrainian society's resilience to it¹¹. The Center within the National Security and Defense Council focuses on information activities in the military sphere, the fight against crime and corruption, foreign and domestic policy, economics, infrastructure, health, ecology, science and technology¹².

Also in 2021, the National Security and Defense Council approved the Information Security Strategy until 2025¹³. The document defines the main goals of the state in the domain, such as the countering of disinformation, the comprehensive development of Ukrainian culture, the raising of media literacy of citizens, protection of journalists, information reintegration of residents of the temporarily occupied territories, creation and development of strategic communications, promotion of Ukraine's positive image abroad and information society development. In addition, in 2021 the Strategy of Ukraine's Foreign Policy was adopted¹⁴. Among other things, it mentions the need to counter hybrid operations of influence on the state, especially those undertaken by Russia.

To counter these threats, the Ukrainian authorities would work in particular on consolidating the international community, raising the awareness of foreign partners on hybrid risks, countering disinformation and using public diplomacy. Thus, Ukraine has created a framework for combating hybrid threats in various areas. However, the state now faces the challenge of having to effectively coordinate the activities between different state bodies within the framework of those approved documents and mechanisms.

⁹ "Нацрада заборонила 'Дощ' в Україні." 2017. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/2155072-nacrada-zaboronila-dozd-v-ukraini.html>.

¹⁰ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №392/2020 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 14 вересня 2020 року «Про Стратегію національної безпеки України». <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037>

¹¹ Центр стратегічних комунікацій та інформаційної безпеки. <https://spravdi.gov.ua/pro-nas/>

¹² УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №187/2021 Питання Центру протидії дезінформації. <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1872021-38841>

¹³ Проект Стратегії інформаційної безпеки України до 2025 року. Міністерство культури України. <https://mkip.gov.ua/files/pdf/45698712365.pdf>

¹⁴ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №448/2021 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 30 липня 2021 року "Про Стратегію зовнішньополітичної діяльності України". <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4482021-40017>

It is worth noting that in recent years the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine has become a key body for combating hybrid threats. In 2021, this organization began to apply sanctions against Ukrainian citizens whose activities can pose a threat to state security. In the context of our study, the most important decisions include the blocking of the assets of the MPs from OPZZh Taras Kozak¹⁵ and sanctions against Viktor Medvedchuk¹⁶. The first decision led to the termination of broadcasting of 112, NewsOne and ZIK outlets, being that Taras Kozak is their owner. The second decree restricted the political and economic activities of one of Russia's main lobbyists in Ukraine. Both defendants are accused of financing terrorism. Their cases are currently pending in court.

In the context of Ukraine's information security, the great role of civil society and media initiatives, known as debunking teams, should be noted. Many of these groups appeared spontaneously as a reaction to the Kremlin-backed disinformation campaign surrounding the annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014. Among the most active initiatives are StopFake, InformNapalm, UCMC, Euromaidan Press, UkraineWorld, Information Forces of Ukraine, Behind The News and VoxCheck.

At the same time, the Texty.org.ua media is actively involved in detecting and counteracting disinformation. In March 2021, five initiatives – UCMC, Euromaidan Press, StopFake, Internews Ukraine and Texty.org.ua – launched the Ukraine Explained project to combat disinformation and negative narratives. In addition, we should mention the Western Ukrainian Network for Counteracting Disinformation created by the Lviv Media Forum, which, in particular, drew attention to the activities of blogger Ostap Stakhiv, who countered the quarantine measures and vaccination against COVID-19. He was later detained by the Security Service of Ukraine¹⁷.

COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES IN THE POLICY FIELD FOR ASSOCIATION TRIO AND EU

To map the opportunities for cooperation, one has to mention that the European Union itself has undergone several phases of developing mechanics for detecting and fighting disinformation. Against the backdrop of active Russian military aggression in Ukraine, the European Union has become a target of disinformation attacks from Kremlin. The European institutions have been under the shelling of Russian propaganda machine. In 2015, these issues prompted the European Council to task the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy F. Mogherini to elaborate possible ways and strategies of countering online disinformation campaigns. As a result, this led to the creation of the East Strategic Communication Task Force.

Additionally, the institutional structure has been enforced and strengthened by the launching of the Hybrid Fusion Cell within the European External Action Service. Furthermore, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, a joint initiative with NATO was set up in Finland. These agencies focus on several tasks provide analysis on hybrid threats, pool and share best practices, as well as establish fact-checking, debunking mechanisms. The basic approach of the European Union in tackling disinformation was presented in the Joint Communication on Countering Hybrid Threats in 2016. Along with a proposed definition of hybrid threats that the EU and its neighbors were facing, the document revealed a toolkit for countering threats, including in the media environment.

¹⁵ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №43/2021 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 2 лютого 2021 року «Про застосування персональних спеціальних економічних та інших обмежувальних заходів (санкцій)» <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/432021-36441>

¹⁶ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №64/2021. Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 19 лютого 2021 року "Про застосування та внесення змін до персональних спеціальних економічних та інших обмежувальних заходів (санкцій)". <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/642021-36753>

¹⁷ Якщо дезінформація захоплює світ, то час об'єднуватись і боротись з нею. Lviv Media Forum. <https://lvivmediaforum.com/news/analitchnyj-zvit-zapidsunkamy-doslidnyckoyi-chastyny-proyektu-zahidnoukrayinska-mediamera-zha-z-protydiyi-dezinformacziyi/>

Given the level of scarce resources and staffing of these bodies, the EU remained extremely vulnerable to external information operations. But at the same time, through various programs and instruments, Brussels offered assistance to public and non-governmental institutions from the Eastern Partnership states to develop their resilience to disinformation, as well as promote media literacy and critical thinking.

The next important phase began in 2018, when several strategies and roadmaps were adopted. Thorough attention was given to this process, against fears of external involvement in the European Parliament elections in 2019 and more than 50 various elections in Member States that took place by 2020. In April 2018, the European Commission adopted the Communication on “Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach”, which depicts the challenges and possible clusters for public-private cooperation to tackle those. In May, under the initiative of the European Commission, the Multistakeholder Forum on Disinformation was convened to prepare the draft Code of Practice on Disinformation. The Code was published in September 2018.

Additionally, in September 2018, the Communication on Securing free and fair European elections was adopted. It is important to mention that the use of sanctions, where appropriate, was envisaged among policy recommendations. In December 2018, the Joint Communication “Action Plan against Disinformation” was presented by the Commission¹⁸. All these efforts constitute a more comprehensive approach undertaken to combat disinformation sponsored by third states and reveals political will to build up resilience not only in the EU but in partner-states, like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Ukraine maintains a proactive approach when it comes to advocacy of joint Ukraine-EU efforts. Strengthening cooperation in countering hybrid threats and tackling disinformation is always on the agenda of the Ukraine-EU Summit. It is worth to notice that the EU plays a significant role in supporting the independent media in Ukraine. The European assistance is important for fostering media literacy, as well as for sharing best practices on strategic communications.

There is a common interest in such kind of activity coming from both Ukraine and the EU. By buttressing up the Ukrainian resilience, Brussels simultaneously undertakes the endeavor to descale the level of anti-EU narratives, propelled by Russia’s propaganda-machine. The Batumi Summit Declaration, issued by the Heads of State of Association Trio - Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on 19 July 2021, demonstrates the common interest of the Trio in aligning with the European mechanisms and norms in this field. For instance, the heads of the three states declared their will to increase the Trio’s resilience and «cooperate with the European Union on common security and defence policy (CSDP), including on countering hybrid threats, strengthening cyber resilience, fighting disinformation, developing cooperation platforms with the EU’s relevant agencies and services»¹⁹.

Ukraine, as a primary target of Russia’s information aggression, has accumulated vast experience in detecting and countering external propaganda and disinformation. Some trends may be of interest for the Trio partners as well. The best practices can also be transferred at the bilateral level of cooperation. In this regard, one has to mention the 2021 launch of the Crimea Platform, an international initiative aiming to join efforts in the de-occupation of the Crimea Peninsula. 46 foreign and international delegations took part in the inaugural summit of the Crimea Platform in August 2021. This may serve as an important forum for drawing attention to the Russia-sponsored territorial conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. If successful, the platform may by thematically extended to other issues related to the occupied territories.

¹⁸ JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Action Plan against Disinformation, JOIN(2018) 36, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018_en.pdf

¹⁹ Декларація Батумського саміту, схвалена главами держав Асоційованого тріо – Грузії, Республіки Молдова та України, 19 липня 2021 року, <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/deklaraciya-batumskogo-samitu-shvalena-glavami-derzhav-asoci-69609>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In countering hybrid threats, namely the information warfare waged by Kremlin, as well as the disinformation campaigns from other third state-sponsored actors, we need sustainable cooperation between the Association Trio partner-states and the EU. To deliver that, all sides have to be engaged in consistent joint activities on many layers.

First, all three partner-states have to adopt a viable base at the state institution level for detecting and countering threats in the information sphere. These institutions' activity needs to be covered and supported by sufficient public resources, of an amount not less than what the international partners contribute with in terms of support for non-governmental teams and organizations focused on fact-checking information, debunking narratives and media literacy.

Under the Eastern Partnership policy, all available resources and programs should be explored to draw attention to the hybrid threats and ways to deter and prevent them. A proposal that is currently pending, which is supported by a number of partner-states and the civil society in the EaP region, is the launch of a specific intergovernmental platform for security issues. It will extend the current multilateral institutional architecture of the Eastern Partnership and adjust it to the needs of the partners.

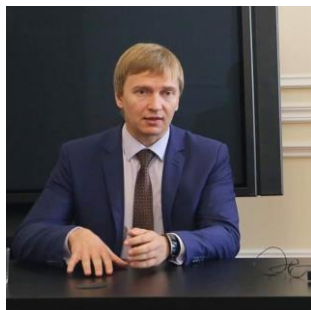
On the level of the Trio states, some coordinated efforts might be taken to enhance the cooperation with relevant institutions, working groups and task forces. The scope of the joint activity may potentially envision any type of affiliated membership and the secondment of personnel to the East StratCom Task Force (ESTF), Hybrid CoE, intelligence cells and European agencies.

Special attention should be placed on developing strategic communications infrastructure in all three countries and taking advantage from the assistance that the EU and some member-states can offer. It will help withstand disinformation campaigns and build up state and societal resilience.

The European institutions may also consider the creation of the Center for Countering Hybrid Threats in the EaP, and more narrowly, on the level of the Association Trio, as a positive perspective. Sharing the experience and best practices in debunking disinformation may prove to be an effective tool.

Of course, as in Ukraine's case, an already established civic-public synergy in fighting the Russian disinformation and other aggressive steps in the informational domain is essential for preserving sovereignty and standing up to the external influence. In this regard, it is of great importance to establish and support international non-governmental coalitions, including from Trio countries, which monitor the vulnerability of states and societies to disinformation and share best practices to dismantle lies and myths coming from Kremlin. Such initiatives should be widely supported by international partners, including the EaP Civil Society Forum.

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ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION



Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (APE) is one of the leading foreign policy think-tanks in Moldova. The Association is committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country's Europeanization. APE was established in 2003 by a prominent group of local experts, public figures, former government officials and high-ranking diplomats, who decided to contribute through their experience and expertise to the development of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova.

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ABOUT THE PARTNERS ORGANIZATIONS



Georgian Center for Strategy and Development (GCSD) is a non-partisan, non-governmental organization. Since its establishment, GCSD has directed efforts towards supporting Georgia's and regional sustainable, democratic development by embedding values of respect, impartiality, accountability, fairness and transparency in all interventions and undertakings. Over years GCSD has distinguished itself as an outstanding local think-tank. The organization has carried out number of research activities and issued remarkable publications, covering variety of topics. GCSD is the first Georgian organisation to establish a unit within its structure fully dedicated to research of topics related to terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation. The Terrorism Research Center (TRC) of GCSD aims to increase the knowledge and awareness of the Georgian society regarding the above stated phenomena and to design and implement projects that help minimise the threat thereof.

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Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" is a network-based non-governmental analytical center, the goal of which is to participate in providing democratic ground for developing and implementation of foreign and security policies by government authorities of Ukraine, implementation of international and nation-wide projects and programs, directed at improvement of foreign policy analysis and expertise, enhancement of expert community participation in a decision-making process in the spheres of foreign policy, international relations, public diplomacy. The Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" is officially registered as a non-governmental organization in 2015, while analytical work and research had been carried out within the network of foreign policy experts "Ukrainian Prism" since 2012. At present, the organization united more than 15 experts in the sphere of foreign policy, international relations, international security from different analytical and academic institutions in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Chernivtsi.

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