

Belarusian authorities confront YouTube vloggers

On 12 March 2018, the Pinsk court equated live streams on Facebook and YouTube to foreign media. The unprecedented court decision marks the latest step in the Belarusian authorities' crackdown against popular YouTubers. Prior to this, Belarus's Investigative Committee pressured two well-known vloggers with criminal charges for insulting the president of Belarus.

The Belarusian authorities' nervous reaction to popular YouTubers demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the state's ideological efforts. The giant Belarusian state media machine has failed in both Minsk and the regions by promoting outdated propaganda narratives. Belarusians of all ages turn to the internet in search of objective information and discussion. Therefore, instead of instilling fear and intimidation, the persecution of Belarusian vloggers brings them additional clicks and subscriptions.

Minsk's YouTube celebrities

The recently pressured vloggers share an antipathy for the current authoritarian system in Belarus. Over the last two years, they have produced politically-charged content which captured the attention of millions of Belarusian viewers.

Sciapan Sviatlou, a 19-year old student from Minsk, recently became the biggest Belarusian star of YouTube. Sviatlou's YouTube channel, NEXTA, excels in producing original videos about Belarusian events. The channel features regular newscasts, entertainment videos, and music covers. "What news" – NEXTA's weekly news digest – focuses on Belarus's politics and social life. "What news" skilfully combines serious analysis with humorous commentary. Alexander Lukashenka

remains the top target of the channel's sophisticated satire.

The NEXTA channel boasts staggering popularity in Belarus: each video receives on average between 200,000 and 400,000 views. In the two years since its registration on YouTube, NEXTA has outperformed Belarusian state television. In particular, NEXTA possesses more subscribers on YouTube (130,078) than either the top Belarusian state television channel ONT TV (100,352) or the Polish-funded multimillion-euro television channel aimed at Belarus, Belsat TV (57,598).

Pavel Spiryn, a 33-year old lawyer from Minsk, uploaded his one-hour movie about Lukashenka in December 2017. Spiryn chose to name the movie "Step-father", highlighting the contrast with Lukashenka's official nickname "Batska" ("father" in Belarusian). According to Spiryn, Lukashenka acts as an evil "step-father" towards the Belarusian people and holds them hostages to his authoritarian rule. Spiryn harshly criticizes Lukashenka's policies and slams incompetent Belarusian officials. So far, "Step-father" has received approximately 600,000 views on YouTube.

Powerful voices in the Belarusian regions

Several influential YouTubers have appeared in the Belarusian regions. In many ways, the scandalous [Presidential Decree No. 3 on "preventing social dependency"](#) (also known as the "social parasites" tax) triggered their media activities. The discriminatory character of the infamous Decree No. 3 rapidly [turned ordinary people into political activists.](#)

Maksim Philipovich, a 34-year old driver from Homiel, initially set up his YouTube channel "No Guarantees" to blog about online purchases from China. Yet, the vlogger got

actively involved in protests against the social parasite tax. Philipovich filmed mass rallies across Belarusian cities and put the videos on his channel. “No Guarantees” subsequently featured numerous trials of political activists from the Homiel region. So far, the channel has accumulated more than 8 million views.

Siarhei Piatrukhin, a 48-year old actor from Brest, earned his popularity by following the footsteps of Alexei Navalny. Piatrukhin’s channel, “People’s Reporter”, features videos related to controversial issues affecting the Brest region. Notably, Piatrukhin publicly investigated corruption schemes used by Brest’s top officials and filmed his personal experiences dealing with rude police officers. Moreover, he raised the alarm about the construction of a potentially dangerous accumulator plant near Brest. Dramatic content coupled with bold headlines have brought at least three million views for “People’s Reporter”.

The popularity of these regional vloggers largely stems from their focus on local issues. In fact, Piatrukhin and Philipovich act as investigative journalists. Unlike Belarusian state television, the vloggers honestly report about the problems of their regions.

Belarusian authorities initiate a crack-down

Philipovich was the first target of the Belarusian justice system. In July 2017, the Homiel court opened a criminal case against him on charges of “replacing the state media with his own video production.” The prosecution maintained that Philipovich had to officially register his YouTube channel as foreign media. A team of human rights lawyers managed to prove the absurdity of charges against the vlogger, and the Homiel

court eventually ruled that video hosting platforms did not count as foreign media in Belarus.

Nevertheless, on 13 March 2018, the Pinsk court fined Piatrukhin and his colleague Alexander Kabanau for live-streaming on Facebook and YouTube during their meeting with the managers of the accumulator plant's managers. Hence the court in Pinsk de-facto recognized Facebook and YouTube as foreign media in Belarus.

Sviatlou has recently attracted the attention of Belarus's Investigative Committee. On 22 February, unknown representatives of the Investigative Committee confiscated a camera and notebook from Sviatlou's parents' flat. They cited as legal grounds for the confiscation a written complaint by an unknown citizen, which stated that one of Sviatlou's videos insulted the president (punishable under Article 368 of the Criminal Code).

On 5 March, Spiryn visited one of the police departments in Minsk to testify about the production of "Step-father". The officers conducted a phonoscope examination of Spiryn's voice. Spiryn does not exclude the opening of a criminal case against him on charges of insulting the president.

A threat to internet freedom in Belarus?

The Pinsk court's absurd decision presumes that each personal video uploaded by Belarusian citizens to social media platforms classifies as foreign media. Any Belarusian YouTuber could find themselves fined for "illegal media production and distribution." So far, the Pinsk court's decision has not sparked mass outrage among Belarusians. Hence its implications remain unknown: either the Belarusian justice system will neglect the premature decision of an overzealous

judge, or it will use it as a precedent to fight politically-charged vloggers.

Nevertheless, the persecution of popular YouTubers has not benefited the Belarusian authorities thus far. On the contrary, Belarusian vloggers have received additional popularity at home and abroad. Taking into account the fact that criminal proceedings against Sviatlou and Spiryn have not officially resumed, the Belarusian authorities still weigh up whether to persecute vloggers or to set them aside.

In conclusion, the Belarusian authorities still focus on the little things while ignoring serious issues. The true danger for Belarusian statehood lies in aggressive [messages undermining its sovereignty](#) by Russian media outlets. Instead of persecuting vloggers, the Belarusian authorities should limit [anti-Belarusian propaganda](#) conducted by Russian media.

Green Men, Western Assistance, 5 Years of Belarusian Web – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

EU foreign policy towards Belarus, who pays for journalism, the new martial law and Western assistance to Belarus are among the topics which kept Belarusian analysts busy recently.

Foreign Policy

Rethinking the EU Policies

Towards Belarus – Andrei Liakhovich, the Director of the Centre for Political Education in Minsk, believes that relations with Belarus are not a pressing issue of EU foreign policy. While the EU has leverage over Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime, it does not use it, as it fears pushing Belarus more towards Russia. Such fears are groundless. Lukashenka's regime will not cross the dangerous line of integration with Russia under any circumstances.

Belarus's Rising International Standing and Its Implications

– Grigory Ioffe believes that renewed high-level negotiations on the war in Ukraine, with an agreement signed in Minsk, on February 12, further raise the stature of Belarus in the eyes of the international community. In particular, the Belarusian president has sought to maintain close ties with both Russia and Ukraine while steadfastly appealing to Western leaders to abandon their increasingly contradictory policy of sanctions toward Belarus.

Russian Ruble's Hapless Little Brother – The worst-performing currency in the world so far this year is called the ruble, but it's not Russian. It's the legal tender of Belarus, a country increasingly uncomfortable with its too-close alliance with Russia. The small nation's latest bout of economic difficulties shows Russian President's vision of a Eurasian Economic Union – a partial recreation of the Soviet Union as a tight, European Union-like economic alliance with Russia at its center – makes little sense for its members, according to the Bloomberg View.

Media Sphere

Andrei Aliaksandrau: Every Internet User Can Fund Journalism

– State media in Belarus are funded from the state budget, while independent media are supported from abroad. It appears that Belarusian society basically doesn't pay for the domestic

journalism. 'Who is going to pay for high-quality journalism?' was the topic of the open lecture by Andrei Aliaksandrau, Belarusian journalist, that took place in December. The meeting happened within the frames of the 'Main question' cycle.

[Five Years of Belarusian Web](#) – Mikhail Darashevich, manager of Gemius in Belarus, analyzes figures of Internet development in Belarus for the last five years. Namely, from December 2009 to December 2014, the Belarus online audience has risen by 65.5% or from 3.023 million to 5.004 people. The retired people group has risen from 1.28% to 5.56%; however, this is extremely little as compared to the whole Belarusian society. The number of daily users has grown from 72.70% to 82.73% of the whole Internet audience.

[Environment in the Media Mirror](#) – the Center for European Transformation presents the results of research on covering environmental issues and activities of environmental organisations by Belarusian media. One of the recommendations of the study is the necessity for CSOs to establish their own news services, press secretaries, PR-manager, responsible for communication with the media. The lack of professionalism of CSOs (and the "greens" in particular) when dealing with the media was marked by almost all respondents from among journalists. The study was carried out on the initiative of the Green Alliance.

Human Rights and Security

[Monitoring of the Situation with Human Rights in Belarus: October-December 2014](#)– A group of Belarusian CSOs has released a regular monitoring aimed at highlighting short-term tendencies in the spheres of human rights, social, political and economic situation in Belarus. Namely, during 2014, 84 public associations, 12 funds and 40 private institutions were registered. Compared with 2013, the number of newly registered CSOs remains at the 2013 level but it is significantly lower

than in 2010-2012, when over a hundred new public associations were registered annually.

[**Martial Law. In Search of Green Men**](#) – Dzianis Melyantsou, BISS, explains a new law 'On Martial Law', which became the subject of public discussions. Some media and experts consider the law as a trail of Ukrainian events and the desire of the Belarusian authorities to take into account this experience to prevent Russian aggression. Melyantsou argues that the new law is more adapted to the allied commitments of Belarus in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), rather than anticipate a conflict with Russia.

Other

[**Ten Facts about Western Assistance to Belarus**](#) – Hanna Sous', Radio Svaboda journalist, conducted an [investigation](#) on the foreign aid for Belarus. In particular, the Belarusian state is a major recipient of western aid; only 12-20% of the total amount directed to the development of civil society. The European Union is the largest donor; the EU institutions spend on the development of democracy in Belarus 13% of the total aid, while U.S. – 71%.

[**Ioffe presents new book on Belarus.**](#) Grigory Ioffe, professor at Redford University (Virginia, United States) [presented his second book about Belarus entitled Reassessing Lukashenka](#) at the National Library on Belarus. The work is based on a number of personal interviews with the Belarusian head of state. The supplement makes up a quarter of the book. Reading transcripts of the interviews one can make his/her own opinion of the Belarusian leader. According to the writer, the book is aimed at challenging the clichés in respect to Belarus and its leader.

[**Dates of the Fifth International Congress of Belarusian Studies are announced.**](#) The largest Belarusian academic event will be held on 2-4 October 2014. The Congress will gather

around 400 scholars and experts from Belarus and abroad. Traditionally, the Congress will include discussions, presentations, and the ceremony of Award for the Best Academic Publication in 2013-2014. Proposals for organisation of Congress panels and sections can be submitted till 12 March.

[From 2014 into 2015: an Attempt to Avoid the Regional Crisis via Administrative Measures](#) – Belarus in Focus' Information Office presents the Belarus in Focus Annual Review 2014. The review covers the political and economic situation in Belarus in 2014, as well as forecasts for the coming year. Namely, the experts note that Belarus is entering 2015 with a major currency crisis and a significant turnover in government members.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Internet Activism Under Siege in Belarus

Until recently, Internet has been the only oasis of freedom in Belarus' political sphere.

But as Belarusian authorities realise that Internet is a powerful means of communication and mobilisation, more and more effort is being put into suppressing online opposition activities. The events related to the upcoming parliamentary elections prove this trend.

On the 30 August, several moderators of Internet community *Nadoyel nam etot Lukashenka* (We are sick of Lukashenka) were detained. The community exists in the largest Russian-speaking social network V Kontakte and has around 37,000 members. The aim of the Belarusian security services was to get access to the community's administrators and delete its content as well as intimidate activists.

Two of the group's administrators, Pavel Yeutsikhiyeu and Andrey Tkachou, were sentenced to seven and five days in jail for a misdemeanor charge of hooliganism, which is a typical way to isolate activists in Belarus. Another activist, Raman Pratasevich, was shortly released as a juvenile, but reports of him being physically abused while interrogated have surfaced. Meanwhile, Siarhej Biaspaly and Aleh Shramuk fled abroad. Eventually, KGB got access to community's administrative controls and deleted its members and content.

Persecution of Internet activists garnered a negative reaction within the Belarusian sector of the web and were condemned by the international community. On 4 September the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, expressed her deep concern with the detentions and arrests of administrators of political social media groups in Belarus, which she described as a crackdown on online dissent.

Preventive Actions on Parliamentary Elections' Eve

A new crackdown on Internet activists looks like a response to pre-election Internet activity, and more precisely to calls to boycott the coming parliamentary elections, which are traditionally regarded as sham in authoritarian Belarus. Internet communities decided to join boycott campaign, started by other political opponents of the regime, and launched it on the web. A closer look at the current foreign policy of

Belarus as well as domestic political situation suggests that a mass boycott is not the best scenario for Lukashenka.

The last two years saw a sharp decline in Belarus' relations with western democracies. This caused an imbalance, where Russia became by far the most important and influential partner. Despite numerous public claims of strategic partnership between the two countries, a fear of being seized by Russia is widespread among the Belarusian elite. This makes a need to normalise relations with the West an important foreign policy objective, though not openly proclaimed.

However, if we set aside the foreign agenda and turn to domestic affairs, a boycott is the least desirable outcome for the regime too. In Belarus' case, where no party politics exists and the parliament has lost its political power long ago, many view elections more as a sign of support to the personalist regime. A mass boycott would openly indicate a lack of trust in authorities and their social contract with Belarusians, which has been eroding due to global crisis and economic model effects. To put in a nutshell, public support is badly needed for both internal and external reasons, and anti-electoral propaganda is clearly a challenge to the regime of Lukashenka.

The Echo of “Silent Protests”

As former administrator of the community Maxim Charniauski says, the prosecution of Internet activists began last year during famous “[silent protests](#)”. His online community was one of the online platforms which supported the protests. Such communities sprung up on the Belarusian Internet and were inspired by the Arab Spring. The initiative was named “Revolution through Social Networks” and occurred in a form of weekly peaceful street actions. Social networks, such as V Kontakte, Twitter and Facebook, played a major role in mobilisation of protests.

Although they failed to gain true mass support, the protests brought a lot of disturbance to the regime. They also revealed its repressive nature to citizens not actively engaged in opposition activity. During these events, community administrators were summoned and interrogated by KGB officers, who wanted to know passwords, logins and other relevant information. However, their efforts were not successful. Maxim himself managed to escape and currently lives in Poland.

This time the KGB had more success, but fortunately for the community, the Vkontakte social network is a Russian legal entity. This means that Belarusian authorities can hardly exert administrative pressure on its owners and managers. As a result, the community was fully restored on the 3 September at the request of administrators. The supervisory administrative rights were, as an exception, transferred to a person who did not create the community and who lives abroad.

Social Networks: a New Target for Lukashenka Regime

Until recently, the Internet was believed to be the only space for political oppositional activity and media freedom, not controlled by the Belarusian government. In fact, most of activity on the part of regime's opponents has occurred online. The Belarusian government did not take any serious steps against such online activity, for it apparently did not perceive it as a threat to regime's stability. However, in recent years some trends have made Lukashenka regime take the Internet more seriously.

The number of Internet users reached roughly half of the population in 2012, and without a doubt the younger and more active half portion of the population. Recent studies on Internet usage in Belarus shows that it is poorly integrated into the global network and remains oriented towards regional Russian-speaking .ru and .by domains. Hence, Vkontakte is the most popular social network, while such services as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ are still underrepresented in Belarus. It

is no wonder V Kontakte has the biggest politically engaged communities, and becomes the primary object of pressure on the part of the regime.

Furthermore, the Belarusian authorities seem to be very “impressed” by events of the Arab Spring, where online media played a significant role. Subsequent “silent protests” only proved these fears. The regime started to introduce some regulative measures towards the Internet before the mentioned events, but after them it seems to pay even more attention to its Internet security. As a result, a policy trend of restrictive regulation of the Internet as well as pressure on active users has taken shape, especially social network activists. The last haven of political freedom is under siege.

Vadzim Smok

Lukashenka Caught Between Russia and a Hard Place – Western Press Digest

The flaring diplomatic breakdown between Belarus and the EU and closer ties with Russia have dominated Western press coverage over the last month. Analysts offer mixed views about the significance of the row for the geopolitical balance between the three parties.

Breakdown in Belarus-EU Relations...

[The Economist](#) argues that the EU strategy is not working. It reports on the EU’s enduring inability to build a common

foreign policy, and the internal blocks to decisive action towards Minsk: the Union even difficulty in agreeing on the list of people on whom to impose the travel ban. It reports that many in Belarus continue their call for increased support for civil society from the EU in lieu of confrontation.

Freedom House's David Kramer and the Fund for Belarus Democracy's Joerg Forbrig have published their prescribed plan of action for the EU vis-à-vis Belarus on euobserver.com: make the return of diplomats contingent upon release of all political prisoners; expand the visa ban list to include those associated with the trial and execution of the metro bomb suspects; and ban Belarusian companies associated with the regime from operating in the EU.

... and All's Well with Russia?

[The Economist](#) highlights the implications of Lukashenka's decision to rely upon Russian support at the expense of diplomatic relations with the EU. Despite making the usual proclamations of solidarity with their Belarusian neighbours, the Russian government's own increasing political instability means that the cover it has traditionally provided to Lukashenka may be finite.

The [Financial Times](#) suggests that Lukashenka's hardball response to the introduction of fresh EU sanctions was only made possible by his current proximity to Russia following the bail-out granted by Moscow last year. However, it warns that Russia's advance can only prop up the regime for so long, as economic growth is once again in decline. Lukashenka's decision to engage in an accelerated breakdown in relations with the EU may come to hamper the prospects of a bailout from the IMF, according to Lilit Gevorgyan of IHS Global Insight.

Writing on the Eastern Partnership web-site, Chair of the EuroBelarus consortium [Ulad Vialichka](#) suggests that it is possible that picking a row with the West may have been one of

the conditions of the Russian loan to Belarus. He warns, however, that the power struggle is far from over, and much remains to be done before Russia can secure its longed-for Eurasian Union and assert fully the kind of control which it desires over Belarus. He describes the current Brussels strategy as “optimal”: the synchronised withdrawal of ambassadors has sent out a clear, unified message.

Murky Waters Around Executions

The execution of the two men condemned for the Minsk metro bombings in April 2011 received significant coverage in mainstream Western media. The [Toronto Star](#) and the [New York Times](#) both pointed to the suspicious context of the bombings and flawed trial of the condemned men. [Condemnation](#) of the executions from the EU and Council of Europe was widespread.

Freedom Day activities

[The Washington Post](#) has described the events of 25 March, at which 2000 people held a sanctioned rally to mark the anniversary of the inception of the short-lived Belarus National Republic (BNR) of 1918, as the largest anti-government protest since the presidential elections in 2010. [Big Pond News](#) reports that the protesters called for Belarus to become a European-style democracy. While the Washington Post seems to overlook the Freedom Day context of the rally, [Radio Free Europe](#) provides more perspective on the events. It outlines that the opposition’s chief call was that this historically significant occasion be given proper acknowledgement by the state.

Looking Ahead to September

Writing on the Jamestown Foundation’s Eurasian Daily Monitor, [David Marples](#) considers the dilemma facing the opposition as they decide whether to boycott or mobilise ahead of September’s parliamentary elections. In the context of the 25 March Freedom Day march, the question of whether to recognise

the Belarus National Republic as a government-in-exile has been revived. Marples suggests that fertile ground exists for the opposition to unite and engage with the many disillusioned Belarusian voters ahead of the election; attention should not be diverted to this government-in-exile question so long as avenues for change from within the country have not been exhausted.

Another blacklist

The [BBC](#) and [Radio Free Europe](#) report that Reporters Without Borders have added Belarus to their annual list of “enemies of the internet”. This follows an increase in the number of blocked websites and arrests of bloggers. It also reports that the authorities have used Twitter to send intimidating messages to protesters.

Belarus in the Arts

The [New Statesman](#) has published a damning critique of Wikileaks’ Julian Assange’s associations with the Belarusian authorities. It reports that one of his associates severely endangered dissidents within Belarus by providing Lukashenka with leaked evidence of which opposition activists were being funded by the US. Controversially, Assange was invited to chair Q and A at the recent premiere of documentary *Europe’s Last Dictator* in London.

The Belarus Free Theatre continues to get high-profile coverage in the Western press. [Euobserver.com](#) reports on the flourishing of underground culture in Minsk and the theatre’s defiance in the face of the authorities. The UK’s [Guardian](#) and [Independent](#) newspapers have drawn attention to the Free Theatre’s funding crisis. The Independent reports that the troupe arrived in London this month for their first-ever Shakespeare performance, in Belarusian, “a language that is banned in Europe's last dictatorship”.

EOC

A Click Away from the KGB: Internet Revolution in Belarus?

Can the Internet facilitate political mobilization? The so-called Twitter and Facebook revolutions in Moldova, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt suggest that it can. Whatever its limits, technology enables people to express their discontent safer and louder, to gather larger protests, and to better inform the outside world of the injustice perpetrated in authoritarian states.

Given Belarus' comparable Internet penetration rate of 27 percent (24 percent in Egypt and 34 percent in Egypt) one would think the democratic transition in Belarus is just a click away. But the Belarusian government and security agencies are mastering the new technologies with no less enthusiasm than the dissidents.

Minsk is not only populating the Web with cheerful statistics and hymns to its leader, but also blocks dissenting web sites, detains stubborn bloggers, and prevents disagreeable content from appearing on the social networking sites. If back in the day many independent sites would shut down voluntarily to protest Belarus' media laws (as happened in June 2008, for instance), today it is no longer necessary thanks to the zealous governmental officials who shut them down with or without the law. The crackdowns on the blogosphere and social networking sites have become especially heavy-handed after the December 2010 presidential election.

Just last week, the Belarusian police began a campaign against

the administrators of a number of opposition groups on the networking site V Kontakte. On June 3, they arrested and later released Sergei Pauliukevich and Dmitri Niafioudau. Pauliukevich's group "We stand for great Belarus" had over 120,000 registered members, and its "Millions March" event had gathered over 40,000 potential attendees. Niafioudau's group "Revolution via the Social Network" was also very popular; his movement "Dvizhenie budushego" (Movement of the Future) attracted over 200,000 members. On June 4, the Belarusian authorities also detained opposition activist Ivan Stasyuk, asking him to stop posting on social networking sites.

The Internet in Belarus is regulated by Presidential Decree No 60, in force since July 2010. Officially aimed at guarding citizens' interests in the information field, the decree establishes web content filters and requires Internet service providers to ensure registration of information networks, systems and resources and to trace and store the identity of each user, to host your website with complete privacy and security, the best option is to use [unmanaged vps hosting](#) services. According to the decree, the Center of Operations and Analysis, subordinated to the President's office, is responsible for monitoring content before it appears online. The web site ordered for closure should be shut down within 24 hours.

Among the recently forbidden content are sites such as [charter97.org](#) and [belaruspartisan.org](#). The General Prosecutor's Office of Belarus blocked these sites when they attempted to gather a demonstration on Belarus' Freedom Day in March 2011. The innocent and the apolitical also fall prey to the authorities. For instance, when Minsk blocked the blog by Evgeny Lipkovich hosted by LiveJournal, nearly three hundred other blogs sharing Lipkovich's IP address were inadvertently shut down.

Unsurprisingly, in April 2011, the Freedom House report on the

Internet freedom found Belarus not free. According to the report, "The authorities blocked international connections to the SMTP port 465 and HTTPS port 443, preventing users from securely posting content on social media sites like Facebook, and sending secure messages through Gmail. In addition, the government created fake mirror websites to divert users from accessing independent news sources, and launched distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against the opposition sites."

Belarus also continues to appear on the annual list Internet enemies compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Minsk is mentioned alongside such countries as Burma, Cuba and North Korea. Belarus's violations come at the time when Internet access is increasingly accepted as a basic human right by the broader international community. Of course, access to the Internet would be only one of many human rights that Minsk violates.

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