



# **Lithuanian-Swedish Roundtable Expert Discussions on Social Resilience and Psychological Defence**

*Policy Brief*

*This policy brief is the result of two roundtable discussions held in Vilnius and Stockholm respectively between Lithuanian and Swedish experts as part of the ongoing project ‘Perceptions of Social Resilience in the Nordic-Baltic Region: Model of Psychological Defence’.<sup>1</sup>*

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The project is implemented by the European Integration Studies Centre.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Integration Studies Centre (EISC), in collaboration with the Swedish Embassy in Vilnius, initiated the project with the aim of gathering Lithuanian and Swedish experts in the field to share their experience, analyse the existing situation and come up with proposals for institutions and policy-makers. Two expert roundtable discussions were held in Vilnius and Stockholm respectively, putting acknowledged experts from both countries together with representatives from official institutions at different levels.

## **Key points:**

- Lithuania has prioritised strategic communication as a means of countering false information, actively developing its capabilities in recent years, but this chosen strategy is too limited and disproportionate to the challenges that Lithuanian society faces.
- After the annexation of Crimea, Sweden started to rethink how to ensure security in today's world, adapting a whole-society and total defence approach to the issue of potential hostile attacks.
- Lithuania needs to follow this example and adapt the concept of psychological defence to the country's realities in order to be proactive and develop a consistent long-term strategy.
- The chosen policy measures should be oriented to solving key vulnerabilities in decision-making, institutions and society, empowering them by providing specific practical tools for resilience and readiness to defend.

## **Introduction**

Hostile propaganda and aggressive information operations are nothing new for Lithuania or Sweden. More than a decade ago, Lithuanian experts raised concerns about Kremlin disinformation campaigns (intended to mislead and deceive) that targeted Baltic societies and their Russian-speaking communities. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the President of the Republic of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė concluded that Lithuania was in a state of war in terms of propaganda and information security.<sup>2</sup> In the light of this, the government has started to react and implement certain measures of strategic communication in order to respond and prevent the spread of false information and negative attitudes within society.

Meanwhile, Russian aggression in Ukraine was an eye-opener for other western governments in terms of the volume and extent of Kremlin propaganda campaigns targeting democratic processes and institutions. Swedish Minister of Defence, Peter Hultqvist emphasised that misinformation from Russia was making the country increasingly unsafe.<sup>3</sup> Sweden has therefore drawn on its extensive Cold War experience in tackling hostile Soviet propaganda. As a result, the well-known concept of psychological defence as a part of total defence (which includes all activities preparing society for war and consists of both civil and military defence) is under development. The new security challenges have forced a rethink of how security can be ensured in today's society. Since 2015, the Swedish government has introduced a new defence bill, which includes not only military readiness, but also various societal activities preparing society for war (including resisting hostile information attacks).

Although both countries face similar security challenges and even potential risks regarding their upcoming elections, they opt for different approaches in dealing with them. Lithuania mostly concentrates on strategic communication and related activities. However, even though it is effective, strategic communication alone is not a sufficient strategy for developing long-term social resilience and the ability of society to cope, adapt and quickly recover from shocks, avoiding escalations.<sup>4</sup> The Swedish experience in psychological defence thus becomes especially relevant and valuable due to its orientation to society, resilience and whole-society approach.

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<sup>2</sup> ELTA "D. Grybauskaitė: Lietuva – propagandos karo stovyje", 2014, Delfi.lt, [<https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/d-grybauskaite-lietuva-propagandos-karo-stovyje.d?id=66109912>].

<sup>3</sup> The Associated Press, "Sweden and Denmark Call Russian Fake News a Threat", 2017, Bloomberg.com, [<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-31/sweden-denmark-say-russian-fake-news-a-threat>].

<sup>4</sup> R. D. Thiele, "Building Resilience Readiness against Hybrid Threats - A Cooperative European Union/NATO Perspective", ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defence and International Security, No. 449, 2016.

After evaluating the current situation and policy measures in both countries, Lithuanian and Swedish experts propose to develop and adapt the concept of psychological defence, which should be based on each country's realities and a long-term strategy to build up resilient, well-informed decision-makers, institutions and society, empowering them by providing practical knowledge and tools in order to ensure their readiness and willingness to act in case of crisis.

In the age of social media and fast-spreading information, society is on the front line of confrontation and negative influences. A strong, resilient and aware society that remains attentive to information consumers and resistant to any provocations thus becomes a key task in the face of today's security issues.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the cultural and social differences between both countries suggest that policy measures chosen and implemented by the Swedish government should not be directly applied to Lithuania, but rather provide examples of good practice and recommendations for necessary policy decisions in the country.

## Outlook

Although similar in their nature and purpose, both concepts – **strategic communication** and **psychological defence** – are described differently and involve a different scope of measures.

Broadly speaking, strategic communication means effectively coordinated communication activities that aim to advance an organisation's mission, shape the agenda and influence attitudes and actions. The NATO STRATCOM Centre of Excellence describes strategic communication as 'a way to promote behaviour in target audiences that is favourable to the actors' objectives and to shape the operational environment'.<sup>6</sup> Effective strategic communication should dispel false information and lies that seek to confuse public opinion, increase social tension or undermine trust in governments.<sup>7</sup> In practice, strategic communication can be implemented through various training events, cooperation between institutions in shaping public awareness of political processes, media campaigns and the propounding of key narratives.

Meanwhile, psychological defence in the Swedish tradition is a part of total defence and mostly based on three components: counteracting deception and disinformation, ensuring that public authorities have an accessible platform to disseminate information in case of crisis, and strengthening citizens' will to defend the country.<sup>8</sup> This might be implemented through various measures and tools including institutional networks, society-oriented activities, infrastructure building, research, education and training. Thus, from the psychological defence perspective, strategic communication is just one tool.

Effective psychological defence should lead to preparedness and readiness to defend even in peacetime; the whole-society approach should guarantee that functions and responsibilities are shared within society (every social group has a certain responsibility as a part of the system); and the authority has a mandate to coordinate those functions and ensure constant open dialogue among all. This leads to a society that is knowledgeable about potential threats, and

<sup>5</sup> J. Pamment, et al., Countering Information Influence Activities, Research Report, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> A. Reding, K. Weed, J. J. Ghez, "NATO's Strategic Communications concept and its relevance for France", 2010, RAND Corporation: xi.

<sup>7</sup> "Resilience: a core element of collective defence", Nato.int, [<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/also-in-2016/nato-defence-cyber-resilience/en/index.htm>].

<sup>8</sup> N. H. Rossbach, "Psychological Defence: Vital for Sweden's Defence Capability", Strategic Outlook 7, 2017.

both capable and empowered to act upon them – a resilient society in times of peace or crisis.

Although the idea of a resilient society might be rather abstract, it is based on several key principles that should be addressed by the chosen policy measures: higher trust in public institutions and media leads to more criticism towards hostile attempts to mislead and manipulate stories, so the reputation of those institutions has to be maintained; and where there is questionable information, citizens should know which government bodies, NGOs, national or local leaders can provide reliable information. Moreover, constant education programmes leading to higher individual responsibility have to be directed at building resilience.<sup>9</sup>

In 2017, in accordance with the new security environment, the national security strategy of Lithuania was updated to include several broad tasks related to strategic communication. It is stressed that Lithuania seeks to 1) contribute to EU strategic communication capabilities and coordination between EU and NATO; 2) work on bilateral and multilateral cooperation between Baltic and Nordic countries in terms of security, including strategic communication; 3) strengthen the strategic communication capabilities of state institutions and create a coordination mechanism for strategic communication between state institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Lithuania pioneered strategic communication initiatives at the national institutional level as well as in international forums. The Lithuanian Armed Forces were among the first to develop their STRATCOM capabilities. The Ministry of Defence also established the Department of Strategic Communication and Public Affairs in order to promote communication about security and military processes in Lithuania. Even the State Security Department and Second Investigation Department under the Ministry of Defence have started internationally acknowledged communication campaigns on potential risks to Lithuanian citizens, publishing annual national threat assessment reports. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has taken the lead in coordinating strategic communication between national institutions to represent Lithuania's position abroad and to push the issue of information security up the EU agenda. In 2017, the Bureau of Threat Prevention and Crisis Management under the Lithuanian government was established. Although in its early stages, this bureau takes the lead and coordinates strategic communication activities between different institutions, creating the integrated mechanism and developing further capabilities.

Despite ambitions to strengthen proactive communication, analytical capabilities and reaction mechanisms, the strategic communication tasks that are the focus of responsible institutions remain fragmented. Different organisations seeking to address information attacks have their own strategic documents and plans of action without a clear hierarchy. Despite current efforts, there is no integrated strategy or overall concept; therefore, measures taken under strategic communication are limited and initiatives remain more reactive to provocations than proactive. That means, in operational terms, that the focus still is on responding to information attacks rather than proactively pushing or proposing preferable narratives.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Pamment, et al., 93.

<sup>10</sup> Nutarimas dėl Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo 2002 m. gegužės 28 d. nutarimo NR. IX-907 „Dėl nacionalinio saugumo strategijos patvirtinimo“ pakeitimo, 2017, XIII-202, Vilnius.

## Security challenges in Lithuania

Any information attacks or other provocations are usually directed towards the biggest vulnerabilities within society. Therefore, it is extremely important to work closely with all social groups, identify the main issues and seek possible policy measures to resolve them. Most of the following challenges can be called deep-rooted issues requiring visionary decisions and long-term work. Recent precedents of disinformation attacks and election meddling in western countries show that these long-term issues are used to manipulate citizens and affect the country's political cycle. This must be taken into account and addressed not just during the upcoming presidential, local, European Parliament and national parliament elections, but in a long-term systemic manner.

**Low political trust.** According to a public survey from June 2018, political parties, parliament and the government are the least trusted institutions in the country (6%, 8.3% and 19.5% respectively).<sup>11</sup> While the police, courts and military enjoy higher trust in society, the key political bodies are widely criticised and symbolise an overall dissatisfaction with democracy in Lithuania (in 2017, 57% of Lithuanian citizens were dissatisfied with how democracy works in the country).<sup>12</sup> Such a low level of political trust hinders open constructive dialogue between authorities and citizens, which is in turn essential for developing a resilient society.

**Nostalgia for Soviet times.** According to the data, those who are dissatisfied with the current political system tend to view the Soviet era positively. High nostalgia for the Soviet era within society might be used to promote certain narratives directed against Lithuania. The survey showed that sympathy for the Soviet past correlates with a positive attitude towards the Kremlin regime and Russian media.<sup>13</sup> These citizens therefore become an easy target for disinformation campaigns, while mistrust and divisions are further amplified.

**Vague representation of the Russian threat.** Russia, as a topic, is generally high on the media agenda in Lithuania. It is frequently discussed in public by politicians and experts. Unfortunately these discussions about the threats that the Kremlin regime poses in our region are too vague and opaque. They do not provide society with practical tools for tackling those threats, and it is difficult to relate local problems to broad geopolitical issues. This in turn creates a certain fatigue on the topic of Russia. Society becomes numb towards such discussions. According to a survey from March 2018, citizens prioritise and distinguish social and economic issues (high prices, emigration, social inequality) as the biggest concerns rather than the external military threat.<sup>14</sup> Citizens and the political elite lack mutual dialogue and agreement on the priorities and challenges of the state. Therefore, it is a challenge to influence citizens to engage, prepare and voluntarily participate in civil activities.

<sup>11</sup> Vilmorus.lt, 2018,

[<http://www.vilmorus.lt/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=2&cntnt01returnid=20>].

<sup>12</sup> ELTA, "Apklausa: mažėja patenkintųjų demokratija Lietuvoje", 2017, Ve.lt,

[<http://www.ve.lt/naujienos/lietuva/lietuvas-naujienos/apklausa-mazeja-patenkintuju-demokratija-lietuvuje-1573153/>].

<sup>13</sup> A. Ramonaitė, et al., Kas eitų ginti Lietuvos: pilietinio pasipriešinimo prielaidos ir galimybės, 2018, Aukso žuvys, Vilnius: 155-157; M. Jastramskis "Auditorijos reakcija: Rusijos propagandos poveikis Lietuvoje", in. A. Vaišnys, et. al., Rusijos propaganda: analizė, įvertinimas, rekomendacijos, 2017, Vilnius.

<sup>14</sup> ELTA, "Apklausa: lietuviams rūpi socialinės, o ne geopolitinės problemas", 2018, Lrt.lt, [<https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvije/2/204955/apklausa-lietuviams-rupi-socialines-o-ne-geopolitines-problemos>].

**Integration of ethnic minorities.** Ethnic minorities – not just Russian-speakers – are a constant focus of the Kremlin’s meddling strategies in the region. This is represented by the Russian compatriots’ policy, which encourages loyalty to modern-day Russia – including its interpretation of history and its political system – while remaining in the country of residence.<sup>15</sup> The Russian compatriot policy exploits Lithuanian internal weaknesses: minorities, especially in the regions, end up in an isolated media environment with extensive Russian state media reach; the Kremlin’s narratives feed on existing feelings of Soviet nostalgia, general dissatisfaction and disbelief that Russian-speakers are the subject of information influence campaigns.

**Low level of civic participation.** As the Civic Empowerment Index shows, participation in civic organisations remains low, with Lithuanians mostly choosing passive civic activities (e.g. *donation*) rather than active participation in civic organisations or communities. This also relates to previously described challenges, because low participation hinders the building of community-based networks with certain roles and leaders, which might be important in managing an emergency from micro- to macro-level.

## Suggestions for policy measures

Strategic communication as the chosen strategy in Lithuania is valuable but not sufficient in addressing existing and emerging challenges because its scope is too narrow. Lithuanian institutions need to move forward and build an integral system of tools and measures under a common vision. The Swedish psychological defence approach is a good example to consider. Such a vision and institutional system would address the long-term goal of building a resilient society empowered to tackle disinformation and hostile influence activities, with a protected decision-making process on all levels, and support for the media in cyber security challenges.

The security challenges identified in Lithuania show that attention has to be directed towards society and its most vulnerable social groups in order to increase personal engagement, awareness of risks and potential crisis, openness and mutual trust. The proposed recommendations do not pretend to provide answers to all issues, but suggest starting points for the next steps.

Several recommendations for Lithuanian policy makers could be summarised as follows:

1. A comprehensive territorial mechanism for crisis management
2. A secure and resilient communication and information infrastructure
3. Reinforced media competences
4. Revised education including media literacy and source criticism
5. Focus on research and the processes within society
6. Support for NGOs and associations.

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<sup>15</sup> A. Kudorsm, et. al., The “Humanitarian Dimension” of the Russian foreign policy towards Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and the Baltic States, 2010, Riga, 320-321.

## A comprehensive territorial mechanism for crisis management

*To create a mechanism for crisis management that involves citizens all around the country:*

Local communities and organisations all over the country should be recruited into an overall network created for crisis management. This network would be used to spread necessary information (e.g. *instructions on how to act in case of natural disasters, how to ensure food, water or electricity supply, etc.*), while local leaders or representatives from those communities would be constantly trained and educated. Such a network would be beneficial for several reasons: local leaders or representatives would be identified, connected with each other and informed about potential threats; the information given would be spread through informal channels and received from well-known and potentially influential people in those communities, thus building better dialogue between institutions and citizens through the leaders citizens trust; and constant work and engagement would make it possible to ensure and control the status of readiness to react.

## A secure and resilient communication and information infrastructure

*To empower an institutional body that would be responsible for connecting all the stakeholders in critical social functions, including the private sector and civil society organisations:*

One overarching institutional body (e.g. *the Bureau of Threat Prevention and Crisis Management under the Lithuanian government*) should be responsible for providing constant support and coordination of communication infrastructure and working on resistance to potential threats. Taking into account hostile attempts to negatively affect the trust in institutions, the key role of this institutional body would be to create a reliable and trustworthy network of institutions, business organisations and civil society in order to provide a platform for crisis management, to guide and support different stakeholders in case of emergency.

For example, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) has become responsible for risk analysis and protection of national elections against foreign influence campaigns. First of all, the MSB analysed all the potential risks and weaknesses in the election process, then concrete measures were taken to solve those issues. For instance, the MSB trained approximately 10,000 civil servants at different levels on what were the potential influence operations and risks related to their work. In Sweden there is cooperation with social media companies where the MSB helps in the prioritising of the handling of fake accounts that could have negative effects on Sweden's security (such as fake government or municipality accounts).

Bearing in mind the upcoming elections in 2019, a responsible institutional body in Lithuania could take the lead and prepare training sessions and information material for all participants involved in the election process (from civil servants and parties to ad hoc local commissions) in order to instruct them how to react to any provocations, false information, attempts to buy votes, etc. NGOs and civic actions ('Žinau, ką renku', 'Baltosios pirštinės'), which mostly operate during the campaign and election period, could be responsible for following and monitoring social media as well as providing a platform for citizens to report on potentially false messages or actions. This could be an opportunity to encourage higher engagement on the part of different actors, shared responsibilities and raised awareness during the campaign and election process.

## Reinforced media competences

*To support, train and maintain the constant dialogue between the media and the government:*

Constant cooperation between the government and the media should be established in order to keep both sides up to date about ongoing issues.

For example, representatives from Swedish institutions and the main media groups have regular meetings where they exchange information and discuss possible actions. One example of such cooperation is the new fact-checking initiative faktiskt.se, which aims to contribute to an open and fact-based public debate. This website is mostly focused on reviewing various types of social and alternative media providing the public with false news. Moreover, this initiative is tasked with teaching its audience how journalists work and how to distinguish information from misinformation. Without interfering in the content, the Swedish government supports smaller – particularly local –newspapers with political sections and political editors in order to maintain the quality of their content and original investigative writing, as well as to provide fact-checked information. Thus, mutual dialogue between the government and the media is essential in supporting independent fact-checking, encouraging media to take appropriate measures against false information and support investigative journalistic initiatives.

While such initiatives established by the media (e.g. Demaskuok) or NGOs do also exist in Lithuania, the networking and teaming-up between existing fact-checking initiatives remain challenging. Therefore, media outlets and NGOs could cooperate more, concentrating their expertise and material in one platform and open it not only to media professionals and experts, but also to citizens to report and contribute content. Such a fact-checking process should become an everyday routine, using the platform as a basis for such practices.

In order to raise awareness, media outlets should inform their users of cases when acts of disinformation have been countered. Negative content (e.g. *public comments, proposed articles or videos*) might be removed from the media platform and these actions should be explained to the citizens, giving them the opportunity to learn and encouraging discussion on the reliability of information consumed.

The Ministry of Defence, National Cyber Security Centre and the main media companies have recently signed an agreement to cooperate in order to reduce the cyber risks of communication. The agreement includes changing information, cooperation, training and seminars on cyber security. The idea of drills and crisis modelling drills could be organised and tailored specially for journalists and big media outlets. This could include not only simulation of cyber-attacks or infrastructure damage, but reaction in case of false information and manipulation. Such drills would allow for an increase in readiness among media professionals to act in case of hostile attack.

## Revised education including media literacy and source criticism

*To promote source criticism and media literacy:*

In light of the huge amount of information from various sources every day, it is essential to have sufficient skills to critically evaluate that information and avoid being misled by false information. For example, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency published and distributed to the population of Sweden the brochure 'If Crisis or War Comes', where one of the instructions is how to critically appraise the source in order to protect themselves against hostile propaganda.

Swedish society has long experience of introducing source criticism and media literacy as essential elements of critical thinking. From early years at school, the curriculum includes aspects of information searching and source evaluation. Through different disciplines, pupils are taught how to find reasonable and necessary information not only from the internet, but also from various other sources, learning how to evaluate their credibility and argue with them. In 2017, there was even the release of a comic book featuring Sweden's most popular cartoon character, Bamse, to teach children about the dangers of false news and the need to think critically. In addition to this, the government agency the Swedish Media Council has launched a nationwide educational programme to teach secondary school students about propaganda. This programme provides an online toolkit of three lectures about source criticism and critical evaluation of biased information such as propaganda. This programme is also presented as a part of a joint project for schools, *Fake / fact challenge*.

The Swedish government also decided to give extra financial support to the National Library of Sweden in order to improve digital skills and the ability to critically appraise sources. The money will be distributed to public libraries across the country to ensure accessibility of services and it is hoped have an impact on citizens' skills.

Media literacy initiatives are being implemented in Lithuania as well (e.g. *Media and Information Literacy Education projects facilitated by the Nordic Council of Ministers Office*). There are ongoing media literacy projects in Russian- and Polish-language schools. The political will remains an issue in seeking to implement a specific educational programme for media literacy in the Lithuanian secondary educational system with a long-term perspective. Such a programme should concentrate on teaching critical thinking and evaluation of information sources in an era of global media and social networks. Relevant guidelines about propaganda and the ways to counter false information could be prepared and published for teachers or even all citizens in order to inform them about potential risks and issues of information credibility.

#### Focus on research and the processes within society

*To engage with academia and promote comprehensive research about society:*

The challenges outlined above show that Lithuanian society is very complex with different attitudes and certain vulnerabilities that might be effectively exploited and influenced by external actors. It is therefore especially important to have up-to-date information and research findings about processes within society in order to propose problem-solving decisions. In addition, interdisciplinary competences between various fields (e.g. *technology and social sciences*) should be encouraged in order to generate more overarching analysis and possible solutions. Established networks and better interaction between scholars, decision-making institutions, media and think tanks might provide rapid accessibility to relevant information and give scientifically grounded advice for policy makers. A better understanding of society might also help to develop better dialogue between the political elite and citizens.

#### Support for NGOs and associations

*To empower voluntary defence organisations in order to involve citizens in strengthening willingness to defend the country:*

Various voluntary defence organisations should be empowered and supported in implementing activities and initiatives in order to boost civic participation within society. The Swedish example of high numbers of involved organisations, communities and associations shows

that citizens are able to organise independently and be members of several civic organisations at different levels. Such civic engagement is essential in case of potential emergency because citizens would be ready to take action (not only military), provide leadership and support their communities without official governmental interference.

Although the numbers of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (the best-known civic defence organisation in the country) membership are increasing, overall growth remains too low and insignificant in the context of the whole society. The organisation should be more supported by the state, directing its tasks to psychological defence and readiness to defend.

## Conclusion

Strategic communication has become the dominant strategy to tackle disinformation in Lithuania. Since 2014, response measures have been developed rapidly while reacting to hostile attacks and protecting citizens from potential negative influences. However, deep-rooted challenges within society reveal a number of vulnerabilities that can be used to affect citizens and their willingness to defend. Therefore, strategic communication tools alone are not sufficient, and the broader vision together with an integrated system of corresponding measures should be developed. The Swedish example of psychological defence shows the variety of tools and measures taken that cover different levels (from local to governmental) and spheres (from education to infrastructure). Particularly important for future policy formation in Lithuania, the Swedish authorities demonstrate an overall readiness to be open and discuss the risks of information security in order to make citizens ready, conscious and resilient in the face of hostile attacks.

The constant interaction between the government and different stakeholders, and openness and orientation towards society, will be one of the key questions of future democracies in the light of various challenges, not only information security. Therefore, as proposed, the suggestions for policy measures mostly rely on the civil society approach – a society that is resilient, aware and capable of acting should be built, one that over the long run will share the burden of readiness, preparedness and responsibility.

The project 'Perceptions of Social Resilience in the Nordic-Baltic Region: Model of Psychological Defence' gathered Lithuanian and Swedish experts and became a valuable experience in building networks and sharing best practice between NGOs, research agencies, universities, scholars and decision-makers. Ongoing discussions and active policy formation in the field of information security show that both countries face similar security issues and are seeking the best decisions to respond and cooperate with partners. Thus, long-term cooperation between Nordic-Baltic states including decision-makers, scholars and NGOs is essential in dealing with security challenges and hostile propaganda campaigns.

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