

## STRENGTHENING ROMANIAS' RESILIENCE TO RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

**Andreia-Mariana POP**

*popandrea@yahoo.com*

**Abstract:** *The main purpose of this paper is to improve public awareness of the influence campaigns carried out in the Romanian public space, via traditional and internet media that are at odds with national interests. In the context of an ongoing Russian disinformation campaign that frequently spreads disinformation among civil society members and, more concerning, generates hostility between the Romanian citizens and their officials, the most common Russian narratives used in Romania are analyzed, and their misleading aspects are revealed. The paper also covers the resilience approach at national level, as well as at the EU and NATO levels, in order to better understand the instruments and procedures available for lowering risks and managing threats affecting the Romanian society. In light of the current situation in Ukraine, the study presents a series of conclusions regarding how the dissemination of misleading narratives influenced the information environment in Romania.*

**Keywords:** *Romania; resilience; fake news; disinformation; propaganda.*

### Introduction

Resilience to disinformation is generally defined as the capacity of states, societies, and individuals to resist targeted pressure and misleading facts that are disseminated through a variety of media, including TV, radio, print, online, and social media. From the standpoint of national security, information resilience must be defined in terms of a state's ability to secure its information space.

While traditional conceptions of resilience rely on a society's ability to "quickly recover" to its pre-crisis condition, we are becoming increasingly conscious that returning to the previous condition is no longer conceivable because so much has changed. Based on our current state of vulnerability in the face of disinformation and fake news, rebounding back may not be beneficial. As a result, societal resilience must consider how to rebound and evolve in the face of several shocks (Dineen 2020)

For decades, Russia's strategic disinformation playbook has mostly concentrated on portraying itself as a victim and democracies as aggressors in order to justify wars on Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, election meddling around the world, and its hostile position toward NATO and the European Union (Otis 2022). The armed conflict in Ukraine began in early 2014, when Russia occupied and annexed Crimea. There has been an ongoing battle between Ukraine and Russia for the past eight years, with daily shelling and skirmishes taking place the eastern border of Ukraine. Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, throwing the whole country into conflict. The Russian propaganda network in Romania grew over time and the topics delivered changed depending on the local environment. Initially, Russian propaganda in Romania was limited to a Romanian radio station that broadcast messages of the Russian Federation. It was shut down, and later, in 2015, Sputnik Moldova News and Radio Agency was launched, based in Chisinau rather than Romania. It was primarily designed for Romania, but the majority of the journalists were from Moldova. (Sputnik Moldova n.d.)

Several additional sites, directly associated with the Russian Federation's Embassy and official Kremlin propaganda, have appeared over time. Due to the current Ukraine crisis, propaganda has become more visible and active. Russia's officials perform an analysis of the Romanian environment, primarily through national opinion polls. Our society is hesitant of receiving messages from Moscow, and some sections of the population are even Russophobic (Arun 2022). The Russian Federation has a difficult time presenting itself directly in Romania, as

it does in the Republic of Moldova, where Putin was one of the most trusted international leaders until recently.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlights how much modern warfare is handled online – and how much democracy has learned in recent years how to counter it. Because lies and perception can affect the outcome on the battlefield, disinformation and deception have long been critical elements of warfighting. On the battlefield, Russian disinformation has emphasized weakening opponents' commitment and sowing doubt about Russian military activity, as well as concealing atrocities against civilians and blaming its adversaries (Otis 2022).

## 1. Russian Disinformation

### 1.1. Most Widely Disseminated Russian Foreign Policy Narratives

Disinformation is articulated on the same mechanisms despite of the subject, and there is a number of key narratives that can be identified regardless of the issues addressed. One of the consequences of manipulation through disinformation may be weakening public confidence in Romania's Euro-Atlantic strategic orientation. Russia understands the "advantages" of its disinformation campaign in accomplishing its own political objectives and considers "fake news" as a non-military tool; for example, the so called Gerasimov doctrine made it plain that disruptive propaganda is a valid and reliable instrument for Russia to achieve success. According to EU Security Commissioner Julian King, the Kremlin is attempting to disseminate the same disinformation narratives in as many languages as possible, using as many channels as possible (Jon 2018). Therefore, we need to review the main lines of the Russian propaganda that try to legitimize the Russian aggression.

By supporting the growth of a propaganda and misinformation eco-system, Russia has operationalized the idea of ongoing conflict in the information environment. The US State Department claimed that this ecosystem "generates and disseminates false narratives to strategically advance the policy objectives of the Kremlin." Using a variety of channels, a vast number of messages are quickly, frequently, and continuously disseminated without concern for accuracy or coherence. (Badea 2022)

An article published in *Security Insight* from the Marshall Center summarizes a project which evaluated the Russian foreign policy viewpoints by examining statements and interviews delivered by Russian government leaders. The research team tracked Russian and Western media for ten months, collecting both Russian and English-language statements, from September 2018 to June 2019. The study discovered a collection of eleven storylines that officials typically utilize when justifying Russian foreign policy (Gorenburg 2019).

Narrative	Frequency
Outside Intervention in "Sovereign" Affairs	95
"Whataboutism"	86
Promotion of International Structures in Which Russia Plays an Equal or Leading Role	69
Russophobia	59
Near Abroad	38
Unilateralism vs. Multipolarity	33
Stability vs. Destabilization	31
Soviet-Era Allies	8
European vs. Eurasian Russia	2
Russia as Bastion of Traditional Values	2

**Figure no 1. Russian Main Foreign Policy Narratives**

Source: <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russian-foreign-policy-narratives-0>

Outside intervention in sovereign affairs, whataboutism, the promotion of international structures in which Russia plays a leadership role, and Russophobia were among the most often utilized storylines (Gorenburg 2019).

Although Russian officials' foreign policy narratives are designed to distort reality in order to promote and defend foreign policy actions to domestic and international audiences, there is one common thread that runs through them all: they all contain an element of truth.

All of these narratives are connected to general conceptions of the world and the roles of Russia and the US in it. Russian officials are able to develop narratives that connect with the dominant frames through which their audiences perceive the world by starting with a key element of reality.

### *1.2. Common Russian Narratives Disseminated in Romania Concerning the Ukraine Crisis*

Russia's propaganda does not function "as a machine, but as an ecosystem". An ecosystem requires the presence of actors acting in the same direction, whether they are firms, individuals, or parastatal entities. Expert Forum thinktank uses the example of Aleksandr Dughin, a Kremlin-connected ideologue who has created a network of influence in Romania among various politicians and opinion leaders that share Euro-skepticism or anti-Westernism (A. L. Popescu 2019)

Russia's main narrative for gaining Romanian sympathy for its invasion of Ukraine is that "*there are Romanian territories in Ukraine*" (Ion 2022). Northern Bukovina and the historical South of Bessarabia are indeed territories that were part of Romania, annexed by Tsarist Russia and re-annexed by the USSR, but through the 1997 Treaty with Ukraine, Romania agreed to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity.

A regular narrative is that "*Russia felt threatened after being provoked by Ukraine and NATO.*" One of the myths that allegedly justifies the invasion of Ukraine is that Russia felt threatened by Ukraine's intention to join NATO.

One of the main arguments used by the Russian Federation to justify the conflict is that it was launched to de-Nazify Ukraine. Also, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian soldiers are frequently referred to as "banderovtsi" in relation to Stepan Bandera's<sup>1</sup> sympathizers, a narrative that was used in 2014 to address EuroMaidan supporters (Pleșca 2022). The only idea supported by the Ukrainians regarding Stepan Bandera is the proclamation of the independence of the Ukrainian state from Lviv, otherwise its other actions are blamed. However, supporting an independent state is not the same as supporting anti-Semitic violence (Pleșca 2022).

Also, a constant Russian narrative addresses the concept of the Russian world. "*Ruskiy mir is everywhere where are Russian speakers, and the Russian Federation has launched a 'special operation' to free the Russians from Ukraine.*" According to Vladimir Putin, "*human rights are being broken massively and systematically in Ukraine, and discrimination against the Russian speakers is being confirmed at the legislative level* (Pleșca 2022).

Another common subject in Russian propaganda is that *Romania is a Western colony with no sovereignty*. The themes of recovering sovereignty, as well as embracing neutrality, are being heavily promoted on social media and are part of the Kremlin's propaganda arsenal (L. Popescu 2022)

Last but not least, we must mention that, over the years, Russia has tried to weaken the ties between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, using different narratives, even claiming that the Romanian language is not spoken in the Republic of Moldova.

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<sup>1</sup> A.N.: Stepan Bandera was a Ukrainian politician and theorist of the militant wing of the far-right Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, responsible for ethnic cleansings also implicated in collaboration with Nazi Germany.

## 2. NATO and EU Approach to Information Resilience

In 2016, civilian resilience was added to military resilience during the NATO Summit in Warsaw by establishing seven essential requirements: government continuity, communications, energy, water and food resources, transportation, mass population movements, and incident management with numerous victims. (NATO 2018) After learning the lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, the Allies understood the necessity for a more integrated and more coordinated approach in eliminating vulnerabilities and ensuring military operations in times of peace, crisis, or war. Strengthening situational awareness capabilities and increasing capabilities to counter hybrid threats, such as propaganda and misinformation, are some of the most prominent challenges after the sanitary crisis. (NATO 2020)

To implement the decision, NATO resilience targets will be regularly assessed, analyzed, and reviewed. The strategy enables the alignment of national resilience targets and strategies, while keeping each state free to decide how it wants to implement NATO directions in accordance with national legislation and in coordination with similar EU measures.

The Alliance's approach to resilience to misinformation focuses on two areas of action: *understanding* and *engagement*. Understanding is provided through Information Environment Assessments, which periodically identify, monitor and analyze information relevant to the NATO mission. This allows the Alliance to assess the effectiveness of its communications and to adapt its engagement in future strategic communications to adequately counteract misinformation. (NATO 2020)

NATO and the EU collaborate on many levels to ensure societal resilience to misinformation, including engagement of civil society, NGOs, think tanks, academics, the media (including fact-checkers), industry (social media platforms), and other relevant private sector actors.

Simultaneously, in 2015, the European External Action Service (EEAS) designed and executed practical methods for dismantling the malignant narratives circulating in the information environment at the European Union level. In order to better assess and counter informational aggression conducted by hostile actors, the East StratCom Task Force was established, and the Euvdisinfo.eu website was created. (EUvsDisinfo n.d.)

In recent years, the European Union has prioritized the information offensive, establishing new instruments to fight major issues about the Union's mission, purpose, and identity, such as the European Union's Disinformation Action Plan, which was announced on December 5, 2018. (European Commission 2018)

The European Commission released its first annual strategy report on September 9, 2020, with the goal of steering EU policies toward a more resilient Europe. The Strategic Foresight Report 2020 incorporates the first lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis and introduces resilience as a new compass in decision-making, while also considering the role of strategic forecasting in building the EU's resilience. (European Commission 2020)

The report examines resilience in the most prominent interconnected domains - socioeconomic, geopolitical, digital, climate change, and the environment - and explains how important it is for accomplishing long-term strategic goals in the context of the transition to a more digital, greener, and equitable society. Information aggression, defined as attacks by authoritarian regimes against democratic systems, is also discussed in the chapter on geopolitical vulnerabilities. (European Commission 2020)

The second Strategic Foresight Report was published in September 2021 and identifies as a major threat the *pressure on democratic models of governance and values*. According to the second report, zones of instability and war near and outside the EU are likely to continue, if not grow. State and non-state actors are likely to improve their hybrid tools,

which include the deployment of disruptive technologies, the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation, information operations, and military and non-military operations. (Commission, Strategic Foresight Report 2021). Large-scale disinformation, aided by new technologies and platforms, represents a growing threat to democratic regimes and fuel a new type of information warfare. These solutions are used by countries, organized crime groups, businesses, and people to propagate disinformation around the world or achieve competitive advantages. (Commission, Strategic Foresight Report 2021)

### **3. The Framework of Public Trust in Romania**

In Romania, Russia takes advantage of the local circumstances, particularly populist nationalist discourse, to cast doubt on Romania's role in the EU and NATO, and to bet strongly on a potential reset of Russia-Romania relations. Indirect messages that spark a number of linked topics are employed more frequently than direct propagandistic messages. There are propaganda sub-themes that encourage Romanian people to distrust the authorities' messages or the credibility of the European Union. There are direct attacks on European ideals, and the narrative that the West is decaying culture is being highly promoted (Olaru 2022).

If we focus on the military aspects, Russian propaganda has made a point of criticizing Romania's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance, which it has depicted as a direct threat to Russian security. Attacks have also emerged and been reinterpreted multiple times in various circumstances, with the main target being Deveselu's shield and the understanding of his function.

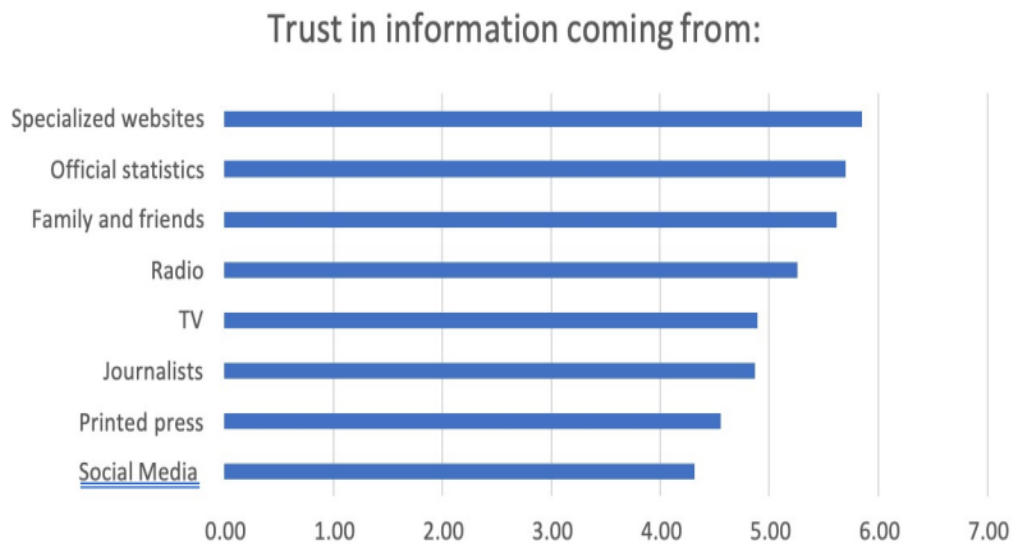
When Russia began its military action in Ukraine, it has had a significant impact on Romanian news consumption. It reintroduced people to traditional media such as television and radio, where official government bulletins regarding the invasion were daily broadcasted. People became more hungry for information and more susceptible to disinformation as a result of the confusion and uncertainty surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Unconfirmed information and grey literature, on the other hand, found their way into the population via social media platforms and peer-to-peer sharing.

The news outlet chosen can have a considerable impact on public faith in the media. In the EU, radio and television are considered as more dependable than social media as a source of news. In the current climate of fake news and polarizing political events, young people are having difficulties trusting the media, but this attitude is also evident among older generations.

According to data from various INSCOP opinion polls conducted since the beginning of 2022, Romanians' trust in Russia has decreased, falling from 16-18% in 2021 to barely 7.5% in April 2022 (Anghelus 2022). The consumption of different online and offline news sources both globally and nationally was mapped based on existing survey data. However, there are still some blind spots. There is a poor knowledge of the growing share of peer-to-peer information distribution via messages (e.g., WhatsApp or Telegram) or emails. It's difficult to state how much Romanians rely on instant messaging for news. Emerging video content platforms like Tik Tok are likewise more difficult to track, making fact-checking more difficult to deploy.

The mechanisms by which disinformation impacts our society, as well as the defensive media strategies used by NGOs and academics in the context of "information disorder", the wide societal issues related to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, are generally out of synchronization (Wardle, Claire, Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09 n.d.).

Traditional media, such as television and radio, are more trusted in Romania than social media platforms. Official statistics and specialized websites are the most reliable sources of information, minimising the chances of disinformation. However, networking from family and friends is an equally vital source of information for Romanians, resulting in a high vulnerability to misleading. The decline of the role of experts in the public sphere is linked to relying on people you know and trust for knowledge.



**Figure no. 2. Trust of Sources of Information in Romania**

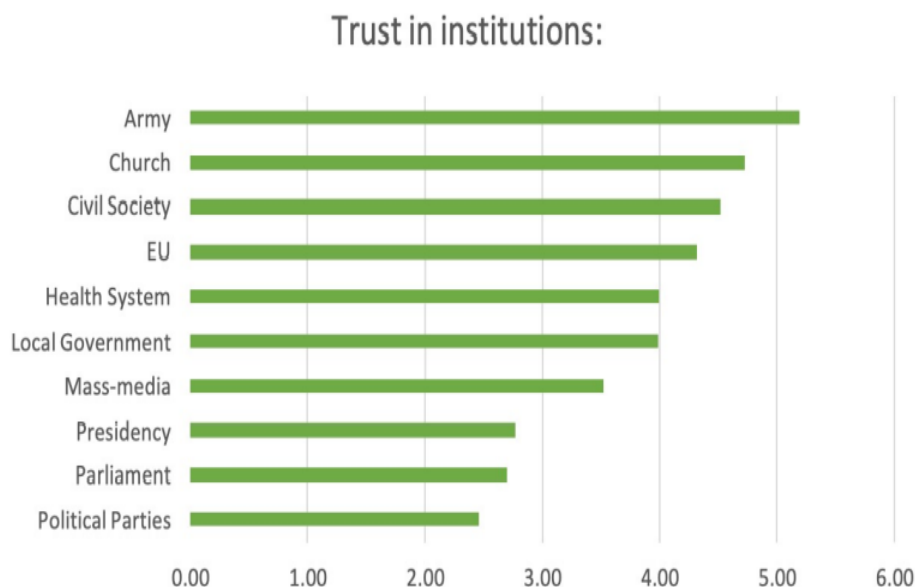
Source: [https://www.eurocomunicare.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Final\\_DISINFORMATION-SOCIETAL-RESILIENCE-AND-COVID19\\_Report-FINAL-1.pdf](https://www.eurocomunicare.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Final_DISINFORMATION-SOCIETAL-RESILIENCE-AND-COVID19_Report-FINAL-1.pdf), p.7

The vulnerability of Romanian society in the context of disinformation is observed in a study conducted by the Eurocommunication Association in collaboration with the Aspen Institute Romania. The information was gathered through a representative survey conducted in Romania in December 2021. The findings led to the creation of a "Threat Matrix," which consists of three elements: disinformation, dilettantism, and distrust. (EuroComunicare 2021)

The study found that people currently engage with news and other information in three parts. From the perspective of the disinformation risk, each of these phases adds complexity (EuroComunicare 2021): *The first phase* is information input, which involves determining where people get their information. The quality and dependability of information sources are critical at this level. *The second level* is information processing, which entails how people evaluate the information they receive. At this point, social dynamics, personal opinions and ideals, or personal experience can all play a role in this level of information processing. *The third phase* is information dissemination, which refers to how people share and spread news and data in general. Official communication, as well as measures to reduce the artificial amplification of fraudulent content, can play a significant role in combating peer-to-peer disinformation propagation at this point.

On the other hand, according to a research evaluating perspectives on news media from 40 countries around the world, 42 % of the adult population in Romania trusts media sources in 2021. (Statista 2021) Strictly referring to the situation in Ukraine, a questionnaire completed at the beginning of 2022, shows that 40% of Romanians agree Ukraine should be defended in the event of a Russian invasion, while 38% consider Ukraine should not be defended and 22% are unsure (Statista 2022).

Regarding the role of national institutions, Romanians have traditionally viewed the Army and the Church as particularly trustworthy (see Figure no. 2 Trust in Institutions in Romania). In Romania, the public trust in the media seems to be average, while official institutions like the Parliament, the Presidency, and national parties currently have the lowest values.



**Figure no. 3. Citizens Trust in Romanian Institutions**

Source: [https://www.eurocomunicare.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Final\\_Disinformation-Societal-Resilience-and-Covid19\\_Report-Final-1.pdf](https://www.eurocomunicare.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Final_Disinformation-Societal-Resilience-and-Covid19_Report-Final-1.pdf), p. 8

#### **4. Romanian Approaches to Information Resilience**

According to the National Defence Strategy for the period 2020-2024, Romania's resilience is approached from two perspectives: "*the inherent capacity of entities - individuals, communities, regions, and states - to resist and adapt articulately to violent events, causing stress, shock, disaster, pandemics, or conflict, on the one hand, and the ability of these entities to quickly return to a functional state of normalcy, on the other*" (Administrația Prezidențială 2020, 11)." The Strategy recommends a flexible multidimensional approach and a comprehensive perspective on all systems in order to increase resilience and reduce vulnerabilities.

The National Defence Strategy places a strong emphasis on international collaboration and notes that it is crucial for Romania to implement the NATO-EU cooperation agenda, particularly in the areas of cyber defence, countering hybrid threats, thwarting terrorist threats, resilience, strategic communication, and military mobility. (Administrația Prezidențială 2020, 32)

The document also takes into account the following aspects, as part of consolidating resilience: *increasing public awareness of hostile/influential actions through traditional or online media or think tanks, which are challenging to manage when new security impact factors emerge such as fake news, the source of which is frequently impossible to identify and attribute; as well as encouraging the development of clear and easily accessible public tools for exposing disinformation's sources, its products, and its narratives.* (Administrația Prezidențială 2020, 11)

The legislative and institutional framework displays a small number of instruments that are not completely tuned to the current technological level. To begin with, neither the legislative requirements nor the organizations charged with reducing information

manipulation cover the entire spectrum of risks and do not allow for timely and effective countermeasures.

Despite the legislative and institutional structure still being in its early stages, the classification of sentences for the dissemination of false information in the category of crimes, with jail sentences, may be considered outdated.

In terms of legislative tools, we can refer to Article 404 of Law no. 286/2009 regarding the Criminal Code that states: "Communication or dissemination, by any means, of fake news, data, information, or forged documents, knowing their false character, if this endangers national security, shall be penalized by imprisonment for one to five years." The problem is that enforcing Article 404 is very difficult because people who disseminate false or malicious information are frequently unaware of it.

Building national resilience takes time and requires cooperation and integration between the government, the private sector, and the civil society. Without taking into account the resilience component, both in terms of critical infrastructures and in the sector of information, our state's modernization and adaptability to technological changes will not be sustainable.

## Conclusions

Official Romanian policy now includes taking actions to resist Russian or other country-sponsored disinformation campaigns, after years of underreaction to Russian influence activities. To prevent polarizing society, limiting populist speech, and decreasing trust in government and media institutions, Romania must develop and strengthen its information resilience.

Some of the initiatives that Romania needs to take to improve its resilience should be: *enhancing access to and examining the practices of social media platforms; a deeper assessment of the information ecosystem and its interconnections*, as well as *helping to build trust*. This assumes: an examination of the difficulties the country faces in restoring and regaining trust in the institutions that people rely on to promote informed public dialogue and debate, as well as the significance that credible information and substance play in those discussions.

Regardless of the fact that the issue of foreign-led disinformation has been around for decades, there may not be a clear way to stop it, and there probably never will be. We should work to train the public, government, defence and security institutions, journalists, and others to be less vulnerable to such disinformation and to increase societal resilience.

Another step that can be taken to counter disinformation is to build partnerships with other states impacted by Russia's disinformation. Few attempts have been made in the bulk of the affected states in that region, including Romania, to forge an important international partnership on this issue.

As was highlighted by the examples provided in the paper, misinformation and disinformation can undermine public institutions' credibility and trust, cause financial harm and endanger democracy. For achieving a strong informational resilience it is necessary to develop a methodical management of all sorts of sensitive data throughout the whole information lifecycle which must include the secure cyber support, media organisations, nongovernmental organizations, and academics to support a culture of cooperation and trust-building.

Additionally, there is no denying that to assure resistance to disinformation, prevent power abuse, safeguard democratic norms and values, and foster trust between citizens and the government, Romania must create a healthy and independent media environment.



Last but not least, an effective approach of strategic communication serves as the foundation of information resilience.

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