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## STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY AFTER PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2023

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The article examines the reasons for setting a sovereign foreign policy as a strategic goal of the coalition government of Smer – Social Democracy, Hlas – Social Democracy and Slovak National Party. It is focusing on those structural conditions that affect the political choice of these actors and determine the real possibilities for implementation sovereign foreign policy in international relations characterized by power asymmetries and economic dependence. There is also analysed constellation of social and political forces in Slovak society which, under certain external situation, creates the prerequisites for an effort to pursue an independent policy.

Key words: sovereignty, foreign policy, dependent development, Slovak Republic


JEL: F52, F53

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty as the main characteristic of Slovak foreign policy is asserted in the Programme statement of the coalition government formed by the parties Smer – Social Democracy (hereinafter referred to as Smer), Hlas – Social Democracy (hereinafter referred to as Hlas) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) established after the parliamentary elections in 2023. Foreign policy has to be implemented on the basis of the national interests and principle "Slovakia first". At the same time, the government declares the EU and NATO as the country's basic living space (Programme statement 2023).

The term „sovereign foreign policy“ has become a part of government official political narrative and plays the role of a symbol of the government's consistent

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determination to defend the country's interests and to pursue its own goals on the international stage.

Sovereignty as a legal, political and economic phenomenon manifested itself in several dimensions after the end of the Cold War. The first was the collapse of the Soviet bloc and renewal of the political independence of the former satellites of the Soviet Union. The second was the disintegration of multinational federations (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) and the establishment of independent national states. The third dimension was related to the processes of globalization, liberalization of the world economy, the growing influence of multinational corporations and the weakening of some competencies of nation states, as well as the economic transformation of post-socialist countries and its guidance by international financial institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank). The deepening of integration processes in Europe and the creation of the EU also affected the sovereignty of states as a result of the delegation of powers of nation states to EU institutions or their sharing.

The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 – 2009, the euro crisis of 2010 – 2012, the migration crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated not only internal economic and political cleavages in individual states, but also contradictions between the actors of liberalized economic, financial and trade relations, international institutions and nation states. In a number of cases, these contradictions were manifested in distrust of international institutions and growing efforts of states to regain lost competencies or strengthen existing ones. Part of these processes was the growth of the influence of nationalism.

These tendencies have been present in the countries of the centre of the world economy as well as in its periphery or semi-periphery. In the case of the United States, it was an intense distrust of international cooperation and the demand to protect the country's territory from the influx of migrants, which resulted in the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and his policy „America first “. In the United Kingdom, the negative social consequences of deindustrialization and above all dissatisfaction with the arrival of migrants in the country, together with traditional Euroscepticism, have been transformed into a demand to leave the EU. The sovereignty was of crucial importance in the British political disputes on Brexit before and after referendum (Baldini et al. 2020; Rone 2023).

On the European periphery, primarily in Hungary (since 2010) and Poland (especially in 2015 – 2023), the global financial and economic crisis has been a significant impetus for strengthening the nation-state and national capital vis-à-vis foreign capital and international institutions, including the EU, and gaining more room for manoeuvre for its own policies.

Sovereigntist narrative in relations with the EU is substantial part of programmes and policy of right-wing nationalistic parties in Europe (Fabbrini – Zgaga 2024). Their

influence on voters in EU member state is already considerable. The representation of these parties in the European Parliament increased after the 2024 elections.

The demand for the sovereign policy in the EU also appears in the statements of Smer representatives in the post-crisis period. Migration, dual quality of food and the budget were considered key in this respect. Despite the fact that migration became the subject of a dispute with the EU, sovereignty was not the predominant topic in relations with the Union during this period, nor the main issue of foreign policy. The sovereign foreign policy as the strategic goal only appeared in a government document adopted in 2023.

The article examines the reasons for setting a sovereign foreign policy as a strategic goal of the coalition government of Smer, Hlas and SNS. It is focusing on those structural conditions that affect the political choice of these actors and determine the real possibilities for implementation sovereign foreign policy in international relations characterized by power asymmetries and economic dependence. There is also analysed constellation of social and political forces in Slovak society which, under certain external situation, creates the prerequisites for an effort to pursue an independent policy.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sovereignty is examined in contemporary literature in certain internal and external power, legal, economic and geopolitical contexts that affect the possibilities of exercising the state's competencies. This approach abandons perception of sovereignty as an exclusive, absolute attribute of the state.

Power asymmetries in international relations and self-interest in the state behaviour, as interpreted in realist theory, perceives Stephen Krasner as conditions for the exercise of sovereignty, but also its violations – voluntarily or forced. These deviations relate to the type of sovereignty that Krasner calls Westphalian and defines as exclusion of external actors from the authority structure within the territory of given state (Krasner 1999).

The examination of the position of states in hierarchical relations combines various forms of hierarchy (in security, economic and political relations) with variant forms of restricted sovereignty or mixed sovereignty. The hierarchical nature of international relations shifts the phenomenon of sovereignty to the level of identifying who owns authority in international relations and recognizing subordination among their actors (Lake 2003).

The establishment, functioning and development of international institutions, and the resolution of issues of effective cooperation among states have created the prerequisites for a new aspect of examining the sovereignty of the state, first of all in the framework of neoliberal institutionalism. Sovereignty is seen as negotiable in order to achieve such benefits as influence over other states regulatory policies, cooperation on the basis of self-interest and reciprocity (Keohane 2002).

Limitations of sovereignty are also interpreted in the context of structural inequalities and dependencies of the capitalist world economy, its division into the centre, periphery and semi-periphery. In the interstate system, which is the political expression of the world economy, the possibilities of independent decision-making and actions of peripheral and semi-peripheral states (strong states are in the centre and weak states in the semi-periphery and periphery) are limited by their structural dependence (Wallerstein 1984).

Neo-Gramscian international political economy examines how, under the conditions of a given international order, the configuration of social forces associated with the production process and the state, a hegemonic system is created which is influencing the behaviour of states in order to preserve the given order. After the Second World War, in the conditions of *pax americana*, trans nationalization took place on the one hand through the hegemonic class, and on the other hand, it was promoted by the internationalization of the state. Its main tools are international institutions, which help to adapt state policies to the requirements of the hegemonic system. The process of internationalization of states presupposes a power structure that helps to maintain consensus through negotiation, while the asymmetry of power is a factor that is taken into account in negotiations (Cox 1981).

Research of sovereignty in the context of the development and functioning of the EU has a long tradition. The relationship between the competencies of the Member States and supranational institutions, the degree of preservation, delegation and sharing of sovereignty the contemporary literature analysed also as the subject of political conflicts. These conflicts are transferred from relations between states and the EU to conflicts within states and have a foundational, institutional and territorial dimension (Bickerton et al. 2022; Coman 2022; Crespy – Rone 2022).

Series of successive and parallel crises (global financial and economic crisis, crisis of eurozone, migration crisis, COVID-19 Pandemic and the economic crisis) and the effectiveness of their resolution by the EU institutions have led to a decline in trust in the EU, or even to questioning the very concept of this organization (Zeitlin et al. 2019). Criticism of the EU and demands to maintain or return part of national powers but without leaving the Union by radical right-wing and radical-left nationalist parties have been identified in literature as sovereignism (Coman – Leconte 2019; Borriello – Brack 2020; Baldini et al. 2020; Basile – Mazzoleni 2020). Borriello and Brack consider the rejection of economic liberalization, and perception of migration as a threat to social rights as characteristic of far-left sovereignism, while the radical right is concerned about national identity. However, the analysis of the attitudes of the extreme or nationalist right in the light of its growing influence is the main focus of works on this topic. According to Fabbrini and Zgaga, right-wing sovereignty has two main dimensions: the institutional dimension, based on the criticism of the restriction of state sovereignty by supranational bodies of the EU, including the primacy of EU law over the legislation of the Member

States and the policy dimension, which requires the preservation of national control over policies important for the protection of national interests (Fabbrini – Zgaga 2024).

Less attention is paid to the impact of crises on the economic and social situation of various social groups, their perception of international institutions and the EU in particular, and the connection of these processes with the ideology and politics of political parties. In analyses dealing with the concept of sovereignty, structural inequality within the EU, relations between the countries of the centre and the periphery remain on the margins.

### **3 METHODS AND DATA**

One of the key starting points in examining the changes in the Slovak foreign policy carried out from 2023 by the coalition of the parties Smer, Hlas, SNS, is a critical interpretation of the motivations for the turnaround declared by government actors. Therefore, the article uses primary sources, especially government documents and election programs of political parties. The article also works with media sources informing about statements of Slovak politicians regarding foreign policy.

Sovereignty and the causes of its strategic accentuation in contemporary Slovak foreign affairs is analysed on the basis of structural contexts influencing the position of states and their behaviour in international relations. The article is based on the theory of dependent development and critical international political economy examining the international context of economics and politics in relation to the social groups and their interests.

### **4 DEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT AND SOVEREIGNTY**

The position of Slovakia in the world economic system, as well as in other post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, is identified on the basis of extensive literature on this issue (e.g. Becker 2023; Drahokoupil 2008; Nölke – Vliegenhart 2009; Scheiring 2020) as a dependent market economy, located in an asymmetric relationship to the economies of the centre. The main features of economic dependence are considered to be trade and technological dependence, dependence on foreign direct investment and foreign credit, as well as labour migration and remittances (Becker 2023, pp. 54-55). Structural dependence is a dynamic process that cannot be understood without the interrelation of classes and nation-states and thus its power dimension, the interaction of external and internal political dominance (Cardoso – Falleto 1979, p. xviii).

The position of dependent (semi-peripheral and peripheral) states according to the theory of the world system is influenced by the cyclical development of the world economy, its expansion and contraction. If in the process of expansion the possibilities of dependent states do not grow significantly, then in the process of contraction, competition between the powers of the centre increases, which opens up space for semi-peripheral states and some can even be classified as centre states (Wallerstein 1984).

In the cycle of expansion, the semi-peripheral states adapt their foreign policy to the policy of the hegemonic power, but in the period of contraction of the world economy, they implement a relatively more independent (sovereign) foreign policy (Tayfur 2003). In the theory of the world system a foreign policy is considered a function of internal and external economic relations. However, it is also necessary to take into account international and internal political relations, as well as the constellation of social forces in the countries of the semi-periphery, including their political traditions and prevailing ideological views.

As a result of the global financial and economic crisis, there has been a significant decline in the confidence of political and economic elites, as well as social groups in dependent economies, in the ability of global institutions to manage the world economy and politics. In some countries (Hungary, Poland), a nationalist economic policy is being pursued aimed at strengthening national business groups at the expense of multinational capital (Böhle 2021; Scheiring 2020; Naczyk 2022).

## **5 THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS AND SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY**

Immediately after the global financial and economic crisis we did not see in Slovakia such a fundamental reconstruction of economic and foreign policy as in Hungary and Poland (in the case of Poland, there are more significant structural changes in the economic area than in foreign policy, which is of historical and geopolitical reasons). Although the crisis had a negative impact on unemployment and economic growth in the Slovak Republic, it did not lead to the emergence of social protests or to fundamental changes in the pre-crisis political development (Malová – Dolný 2016). The preservation of continuity is largely due to the fact that despite criticism of the negative social consequences of the neoliberal policies of center-right parties, Smer and other opposition parties were unable to implement an alternative policy after their victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

Smer, as a social democratic party and its coalition partners at that time (Mečiar's Movement for democratic Slovakia and SNS) continued to prepare for joining the eurozone, despite the fact that they had expressed their disagreement with this step before the elections. They respected the fact that the policy of macroeconomic stability and adoption of the euro had the support of foreign capital, which in this period have already played a key role in the Slovak industry and financial sector. Although a differentiated impact of the common currency on Slovak businesses was expected, the national capital also supported the adoption of the euro.

Under this constellation of social and political forces, Smer associated the entry into the eurozone, and the deepening of integration with the strengthening of Slovakia's international position, as well as its own power. Therefore, even after the international financial and economic crisis and the eurozone crisis, it wanted to belong to the core of the EU, i.e. to its economically strongest part, but also the most institutionally connected.

It was ready to accept the integration of the country with a more significant sharing or delegation of national sovereignty to supranational institutions (Kurucz 2018).

The dispute over sovereignty with the EU emerged during the migration crisis in 2015. The government of Robert Fico refused of the quota system approved by the EU. The mandatory relocation of migrants was marked as the violation of state sovereignty. The rejection of the EU decision was the government's response to the concerns that prevailed in the society and the role of guardian of sovereignty in such a sensitive issue was advantageous for government with regard to the parliamentary elections that were supposed to take place in 2016. The perception and interpretation of migration as a threat to the sovereignty of the state and the security of the population, in addition to historical, ideological and psychological causes, is based also on structural conditions. It is related to the contradiction between the inequality of countries in the conditions of openness of globalization (Melegh et al. 2021).

Government submitted a complaint on quota decision toward European court of justice (Hungary joint the complaint). Although Prime Minister Fico expressed concern that the influx of migrants would result in the threat of terrorism and violence, but he was willing to accept the country's voluntary relocation of migrants (Bauerová 2018). Finally Court dismissed complaint of Slovak Republic and ruled the EU decision on relocation as proportionate.

Although decisions in the EU Common foreign and security policy are almost taken by unanimity, the governments led by the Smer before 2023 did not promote specific approaches and did not veto EU common positions. The same was the policy of the Slovak government within NATO. In relations with Russia, Smer declares sympathy based on the historical roots of Slavic solidarity. An important role in bilateral relations with Russia was played by long-term dependence on Russia supply of oil and natural gas and the effort to develop economic cooperation, nevertheless these factors did not change the strategic orientation of Slovak foreign policy on the EU and NATO (Marušiak 2013). However, the "Russian question" in Slovak politics has gained much more importance and controversy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## **6 SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE 2023 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS**

The requirement to pursue a sovereign foreign policy has become of fundamental importance in Smer's policy after its defeat in the parliamentary elections in 2020. This approach has been intensively demonstrated in the criticism of the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between Slovak Republic and USA and on the issue of support for Ukraine after Russia's invasion. DCA sets forth the framework for enhanced cooperation between both countries and supplements the terms and conditions for the presence of U.S. forces and their dependents as well as U.S. contractors on the territory of the Slovak Republic. Smer and other opposition parties criticized the agreement because, in their opinion, it limits Slovakia's sovereignty in some issues of the stay of American military

units on Slovak territory, allows the creation of American military bases in the Slovak Republic and the approach of American troops to the Russian border (Poslanci schválili obrannú dohodu medzi SR a USA 2022).

Smer, as an opposition party, condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and at the same time opposed supply of military aid to Ukraine, as such support, in its view, contributes to further tensions in Europe. At the same time, however, party supported sending of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Smer chairman R. Fico demanded that Slovakia have its own opinion and not adapt to the big players (Smer odmieta podporu Ukrajiny vojenským materiálom aj ochranu slovenských hraníc vojakmi NATO 2022).

The victory in the 2023 parliamentary elections allowed Smer to form a coalition government together with Hlas and SNS and its main theses on sovereign foreign policy declared by the Smer before elections were reflected in the Program statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic. The document asserts the return of sovereignty to Slovak foreign policy and the promotion of the principle of "Slovakia first", which is a repetition of the motto that former US President Donald Trump followed and is also a guide to the foreign policy of Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary. At the same time government confirmed importance EU and NATO membership for the Slovak Republic, however it did not, explicitly or implicitly, call into question the political and legal obligations arising from the membership in both organizations, nor does it raise the question if these commitments affect the sovereignty of Slovakia and its foreign policy.

The content of a sovereign foreign policy takes the most concrete form in the program statement concerning relations to the EU. Along with the EU's exceptionality, the right to critically assess the activities of its bodies is highlighted. Particular emphasis is placed on the requirement to maintain the right of veto of the Member States on matters where the consent of all Member States has been required. Government is refusing transfer of additional national competences to the Union bodies. However, there is no demand for the repatriation of already existing EU policies to nation states, nor for a fundamental reform of the EU that would result in a Union of nation states. Rather, it is an effort to maintain the status quo and not to extend the powers of the EU bodies.

In the context of the war in Ukraine and EU sanctions against Russia, Smer declared in its election programme that the main criterion of its position in sanctioning any state is the efficiency of the proposed sanctions and especially their economic and social impacts on Slovakia. Since establishment of the new coalition government in October 2023 Slovakia has so far proceeded jointly with majority of member state and vote in favour of all EU economic sanctions as well as targeting those responsible for serious human rights violations and abuses (Timeline - EU sanctions against Russia 2024).

On such a strategically important issue as Ukraine's membership in NATO, the Slovak government, together with Hungary, takes a position that differs from the views of other members of the alliance. Slovak Prime Minister R. Fico expressed an opinion

that Ukraine's NATO accession would lead to the outbreak of World War III. Despite this unequivocal position, Slovakia at the alliance's summit in Washington in July 2024 supported the declaration stating that Ukraine is on an "irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership", although adding that Ukraine's membership requires the consent of all NATO member states. (Washington Summit Declaration 2024)

Sovereignty has become the key principle of the Slovak government's approach to the preparation of the WHO Pandemic Agreement, which is to ensure providing all countries with the necessary protective material, medicines and vaccines in a timely manner. The Ministry of Health warned in the process of preparing the document that it would not sign any documents weakening Slovakia's position as a sovereign state (Slovensko nepodporí aktuálnu verziu novej pandemickej zmluvy 2024). Due to the different positions of the countries and the need for further negotiations, the approval of the agreement has been postponed until 2025.

However, Slovakia has disassociated itself from the consensually adopted package of amended articles of the International Health Regulations (IHR) This legal document defines countries' rights and obligations in handling public health events and emergencies that have the potential to cross borders. The amendments are based on the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim strengthen preparedness to global health emergencies. Slovakia has not blocked the approval of the rules by dissociation and so far there is a possibility to join this framework legislation for international cooperation in health protection.

In identification of the reasons of changes made in foreign policy by Smer and its coalition partners the COVID-19 crisis, and the associated economic crisis, which, according to the World Bank's assessment, was the largest in more than a century (World Development Report 2022), is playing substantial role. The COVID-19 crisis has reopened questions about the ability of international institutions, including the EU, to deal effectively with global problems. The European Commission was criticized for failure to harmonize approaches of EU member states concerning supply and using of vaccines (Benoit – Hay 2022).

The crisis also showed, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, that the unequal opportunities for countries, to obtain medicines and other medical devices are the results of economic power asymmetries among states. The pursuit of an almost exclusively individual solution to the pandemic has led to a phenomenon referred to as coronationalism (Bouckaert et al. 2020). The COVID-19 crisis, as well as the eurozone crisis and the migration crisis (polycrisis of the EU), polarized actors, increased political mobilization and creating polycleavageas and "disproportionally widening core-periphery gap" (Zeitlin et al.2019, pp. 263-265).

In Slovakia, these processes have been reflected, among other things, in a decline in the trust of the Slovak population in European institutions. Trust has been declining

since 2020 and reached the lowest level in 2023 (Baboš and Világi 2024). Ineffective management of the pandemics and economic crisis by the government led by the populist Ordinary people and independent personalities party (OLANO) caused considerable frustration among large groups of the population.

Unlike the global financial and economic crisis 2008, the dissatisfaction of the population with the handling of the pandemic in Slovakia sparked protests and demonstrations against the government's measures, especially regarding vaccination and mass testing. Smer played an active role in organizing them (along with the far-right People party our Slovakia - ĽSNS and the Republic - Republika). Paradoxically, Smer, claiming itself to be social democratic party, mobilised protesters by libertarian arguments. It demanded the right of individual choice regarding vaccination and the use of masks. At the same time, it criticized that vaccination is a business and the interest of large pharmaceutical companies (Očkovanie je biznis pre farmaceutické firmy, tvrdí Fico 2021). Smer was also significantly motivated in its protests against the government by the ongoing investigations of Smer politicians, state officials and businessmen close to the party on suspicion of corruption, while some state officials and businessmen were also convicted. Smer accused the government of abusing state power to fight the opposition.

After the parliamentary elections in 2023, Smer and its coalition partners have not shown any ambition to make significant reforms so far, with the exception of those measures that directly or indirectly affect their power (the Criminal Code, the media sphere - the new law on public radio and television) and the declared new approach to foreign policy. Before or after the parliamentary elections, the parties of the current coalition government did not signal their intention to make structural changes in the economy, including relations between national and multinational capital. Those business groups, together with some of the senior officials who, especially after 2012, were closest to Smer or even the SNS, are not interested in the Hungarian or Polish-type economic reforms carried out in the last almost fifteen years. The goal of the current government is to maintain the status quo in this area with a sufficiently strong position of the state in the economy (Programme statement 2023).

Structural reforms that would affect relations between domestic and foreign capital are not demanded by the strongest opposition liberal party Progressive Slovakia. They put emphasis primarily on market principles in the economy and the promotion of innovation. This corresponds to their ties to those segments of national capital that operate mainly in the field of information technology and technological innovations (Plán pre budúcnosť 2023).

The inflow of foreign direct investment is still considered to be one of the main means of economic growth. There is a consensus on this issue between the current coalition government and the opposition, although there are differences in ideas about where the capital should come from. There are fundamental geoeconomic and

geopolitical differences on this issue. Smer and its partners, as in foreign policy, advocate a "multi-vector approach" in this area, and are looking for sources of investment outside the EU, paying special attention to the possibilities of using Chinese capital in the field of transport infrastructure. On the other hand, Progressive Slovakia warns against the import of Chinese investments, among other things, due to the lack of transparency of financing and refers to the negative experience of some EU Member states.

The orientation towards attracting further foreign direct investment is a continuation of the logic of development characteristic of dependent capitalism. This framework will continue to be decisive for the foreign policy of the coalition government of the Smer, Hlas and SNS parties, but in the conditions of main power competition, an effort is being made to gain more opportunities for independent decision-making. Such a policy is ideologically based on justifying the legitimacy of prioritizing one's own national interests, but avoids broader systemic interpretations.

Fourteen years ago, V. Orbán justified the new approaches in Hungary's foreign policy (but also within the framework of dependent capitalism), as well as changes in the legal, economic and political order of the country, with the crisis of the West and liberal capitalism, and at the same time argues the need to protect Hungary's freedom and independence from the interference of "Brussels". The Hungarian prime minister has repeatedly come up with new foreign policy initiatives, in some cases exceeding the real possibilities of his country. The approach of Smer and the government led by it has so far been rather defensive, without major foreign policy ambitions.

## **7 CONCLUSIONS**

In the implementation of the foreign policy of the coalition government of Smer, Hlas and SNS, it is possible to observe a difference between the declared goals and specific political steps. The Slovak government is choosing a more cautious approach on a number of issues that it considers essential, such as sanctions against Russia or Ukraine's EU and NATO membership. On the one hand, it does not give up its efforts to manoeuvre politically in the conditions of increasing competition between various economic and power centres. Dependence of the economy on foreign direct investments conditions the effort to diversify sources of foreign capital and the related expansion of the space for political cooperation beyond the borders of the current economic and security groupings of which Slovakia is a member. On the other hand, there are structural dependencies that have a limiting effect on the implementation of the declared sovereign foreign policy and are reflected in the actions of the coalition government of Smer, Hlas and SNS on the international scene.

The high degree of dependence on European funds forces the Slovak government to respect this fact in its relations with the EU. Against the background of the experience of Hungary and Poland, which the EU, especially due to reservations about violations of

the principles of the rule of law, blocked part of the contributions from EU funds, the Slovak government is faced with the problem of how to avoid such a threat.

The extraordinary continental and global security threats determined by the war in the eastern part of Europe create more or less open pressure on Slovakia to respect the current hegemony and power dependencies.

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