



## INFLUENCE OPERATIONS, BETWEEN THE ETHICAL AND CRITICAL FACET

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DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2022.3.05

*The psychological operations (PSYOPS) doctrines of many NATO member states, including Romania, do not allow the use of influence activities on internal audiences. While this is an ethical provision, difficulties arise when formulating an adequate counter-propaganda strategy, as domestic groups that are susceptible to influence are targeted by an effective propaganda conducted by the adversary. The 2014 edition of the NATO doctrine on PSYOPS (psychological operations) was ambiguous with regard to this limitation, while the Romanian doctrine from 2016 kept it, in accordance with the older NATO doctrine from 2007. With this limitation PSYOPS risk being ineffective in countering propaganda, their role being restricted to analysing the effects of the propaganda on the audiences and making recommendations to counter it. Without using influence activities, the recommendations would be, based on the scenario, addressing the public or not (choosing "silence") with information activities through the responsible structures. Going further, inform and influence activities (IIA) intertwine, which leads to the need for more clarity in the doctrines that regulate their employment. The propaganda of the Russian Federation in Donbas, that victimised the separatists leading to their support for the invasion of Ukraine is a relevant example for situations when PSYOPS should be allowed to target internal audiences. The present paper does not go into detail on the case of Ukraine but problematises on the above-mentioned ethical limitation that has the advantage of giving the adversary advantages on multiple levels.*

*Keywords: inform; influence; psychological operations; counter-propaganda; limitation;*



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## INTRODUCTION – THE NEED TO RETHINK HOW INFLUENCE OPERATIONS ARE EMPLOYED

The war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, named by the Kremlin special military operation, stands proof to the fact that the access to public information – granted during peace time as one of the rights and liberties guaranteed by democratic societies – cannot be fully ensured during wartime. The decisive role of the information warfare on the attainment of political and military objectives leads to the need for the imposition of limitations with regard to the access to public information, not only in the states that are engaged in the conflict, but also in third party states. Thus, in order to prevent the potential effects of the propaganda led by the Russian Federation, many democratic states have chosen to forbid the access to sources of information from Russia. This measure, meant to limit the exposure of the population from Western states to the propaganda conducted by the Kremlin, raises questions on the susceptibility of the audiences from democratic states to the propagandistic messaging efforts of the Russian Federation and on the means that these states have to counter the phenomenon.

In Donbas, as one article in the French publication *Le Monde* noted, “20 years of Russian propaganda led to war (...) Vladimir Putin prepared for armed war with a war on the minds” (Hopquin, 2022), which he won in time. In eastern Ukraine, the propaganda of the Russian Federation constantly demonised Kyiv and pro-European leaders, determining the Ukrainians living there to consider themselves indeed victims of a “genocide” and motivating them to support the war initiated by the Russian Federation against the so-called “Nazification of Ukraine”, while believing narratives that for the Western world appear to be fictional. As the Russian Federation won the fight on the minds of the Ukrainian separatists, investing time and resources in this “victory”, one questions arises – “What could have Ukraine done better to counter the actions of the Russian Federation in the information environment, that nurtured the division among its own citizens?”. But expanding

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from the case of Ukraine, where many lessons are yet to be identified, the need to rethink the way in which NATO states respond to adversary propaganda and employ influence operations arises.

## INFLUENCE – ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Influence operations are seen as activities that have a malign effect on the audience that is being targeted. They are treated from the morality standpoint, as the entity that conducts such activities wants to determine an action or inaction of an individual/a group with a certain intention. When influence has a role that is considered “*pro-social*”, influence activities are acceptable, being considered informative or educational campaigns – like those that cover environmental, medical, alcohol or tobacco consumption fields. This happens following a consensus of the majority – many times supported by science, according to which these campaigns intend to shape the individual in a “*good*” sense. Thus “*the majority*” does not question the morals behind the attempt to change the individual, his behaviour, and choices, even if he is a citizen of the same state or a member of the group. Even the idea of having the state behind the campaign does not raise morality issues. But when the purpose of influence campaigns enters the sphere of the military and political objectives, in the benefit of the state, influence activities conducted by the state on its citizens are not considered acceptable by “*the majority*”.

Considering the extended model of persuasion proposed by Robert H. Gass and John S. Seiter (Deac, Roşcan, 2018, p. 32), influence operations belong to the category of “*pure persuasion*”, having the following features: they are certainly intentional, interpersonal and they intend to produce effects. The ethical issues attributed to persuasion can be solved if the agents behind it respect an ethical code of persuasion (Ib., p. 39). Propaganda, compared to persuasion, requires more organisation, being defined by Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell as “*the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and obtain a response that corresponds to the interest of the propagandist*” (Ib.). It thus results that propaganda needs planning. This requires establishing the effects that need to be attained (starting from interests/objectives), refining the audiences that are susceptible to influence and determining the techniques that can bring the desired results. Propaganda is seen

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more frequently though as a “negative”, “selfish” action, being considered that it serves entities that want to affect groups, individuals, following their own interests. In a military context, ignoring the use of propaganda from ethical reasoning would certainly be a mistake, as it would offer advantages to the adversary.

NATO PSYOPS, that have as a first goal “to influence”, are grounded in ethical doctrinal principles. Thus, “truthfulness” refers to the fact that PSYOPS must be based on real information, while considering the use of false information counterproductive as it affects long term credibility and success. Another similarly important principle is “credibility”, which is ensured by employing facts that cannot be contested, so that when they are examined by the audience, they are perceived as plausible, acceptable. “Attribution” is another NATO PSYOPS principle, considered necessary to maintain credibility. Thus, PSYOPS are generally attributed to NATO, or to a partner state or nation (AJP-3.10.1, 2014, pp. 1-6). The Romanian PSYOPS doctrine has adopted these principles as well, including: truthfulness, which provides that “PSYOPS is based on the use of true information” (Romanian Psychological Operations Doctrine, 2016, p. 14); assuming identity, which “must be ensured for all activities conducted by PSYOPS” (Ib.) and credibility – “the use of indisputable information ensures the success of PSYOPS products when critically analysed by the audience” (Ib.).

Following the war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, there are talks on the fact that Ukraine “won” the support of the Western world employing means that are specific to the information warfare (Reisher, Jacobs, Beasley, 2022). Ukraine’s social media campaigns, such as those depicting the atrocities committed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, mythologising Ukrainian heroes, but also presenting the adversary’s armed forces as being made up of soldiers of a questionable value, have surely been efficient in obtaining international and domestic support. Thus, certainly, no limitation has been applied when it comes to influencing the internal or international public on the premise that it would not be ethical to do so. And the lack of this limitation has ensured Ukraine’s success in maintaining the support of the international community for the war effort and in increasing the cohesion of its own population in front the common enemy. It can be argued consequently that, in a critical situation, the employment of influence operations on the internal and international



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public is not only justified, but it is a precondition for success in the operational environment. Obtaining the support of this category of audiences for the legitimacy of the actions conducted by state authorities may be optimized through complementary efforts led both through political and military instruments.

## THE IMPACT OF THE LIMITATIONS IN EMPLOYING INFLUENCE OPERATIONS ON THE EFFICIENCY OF COUNTER-PROPAGANDA ACTIONS

*The military doctrine of most NATO member states limits the use of influence operations on domestic audiences, which are to target only the adversary. Difficulties arise when defining the proper strategies of response to adversary propaganda that is targeting own citizens or forces, without employing influence operations as well.*

In accordance with Romania's Constitution, *"The armed forces are subordinated exclusively to the will of the people, in order to guarantee the sovereignty, independence and unity of the state, the territorial integrity of the state and of the constitutional democracy"* (The Constitution of Romania, Art. 118). Thus, military operations, including influence operations are planned based on the premises that they will serve *"the will of the people"*, considered in this paradigm homogeneous or at least *"the will of the majority"*. The purpose of influence operations planned in a military context is to attain military and political objectives for the benefit of its own forces, and extrapolating, to contribute lastly to guaranteeing the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the state. There is a need to establish an ethical code, under the auspices of which the propaganda activities conducted by the armed forces for the benefit of *"the will of people"* would be considered acceptable.

The public discourse fails in approaching influence operations conducted by state entities in a nuanced way, considering in an a priori way that by employing them, the rights of the targeted citizens would be infringed. Thus, the military doctrine of most NATO member states limits the use of influence operations on domestic audiences, which are to target only the adversary. Difficulties arise when defining the proper strategies of response to adversary propaganda that is targeting own citizens or forces, without employing influence operations as well. As a response strategy, the military specialists in the field, are left with the *"weapon"* of informing the internal audience, limiting themselves in using tactics, techniques and procedures that fall under the influence practices from ethical reasoning, even if the situation is critical. Real contexts, like the war in Ukraine, shows that there is a need for a pragmatic analysis on the way that influence operations

will be employed in a military context, as a response to the adversary propaganda that is targeting the domestic audience.

In the USA, the Department of Defence (DoD) prohibits directing influence operations on the domestic audience. The definition of the Forces responsible to conduct Military Information Support Operations (MISO) of the US Armed Forces clarifies that influence activities will be directed only upon external audiences, while US citizens can only be targeted with information messages disseminated by the MISO specialists: *“MISO forces are trained, equipped, organised, mission-tailored and purpose-designed to influence foreign individuals and groups, and inform both domestic and foreign populations”* (FM 3-53, 2013, p. 1-1). Further, the MISO manual goes into details in explaining the type of mission in which the capability is used:

- MILINFO – Military Information (informing and influencing foreign TAs in support of DoD activities and operations);
- IIS – Interagency/Intergovernmental Support (shaping and influencing foreign decision-making and behaviours in support of US regional objectives, policies, interests, theatre military plans and contingencies);
- CAIS – Civil Authority Information Support (the use the information dissemination capabilities requested by a federal agency in support of relief operations in the wake of natural and man-made disasters within the geographical area of the USA) (Ib.).

It clearly results thus that internal audiences can only be targeted in the USA by MISO specialists with information messages within CAIS missions.

In NATO, psychological operations (PSYOPS) activities are meant to influence targeted audiences, in order to achieve military and political objectives. PSYOPS are the equivalent of MILINFO, but NATO doctrine does not state explicitly that they are destined to engage audiences that are foreign to NATO, but *“approved audiences”*. The 2014 NATO doctrine on PSYOPS (in effect) defines PSYOPS as *“planned activities using methods of communication and other means directed at approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives”* (AJP-3.10.1, 2014, p. 1-1). The target audiences are approved by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) for NATO military



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operations. The 2007 NATO doctrine on PSYOPS stated that NATO forces and its capabilities can be used to analyse the effects of the adversary’s propaganda on “friendly” audiences, uncommitted civilian audiences, and own forces, but will not be employed to engage NATO forces. Further, the annex of the doctrine that referred to counter-propaganda techniques and procedures explained that it will engage approved audiences affected by hostile propaganda, less NATO forces and citizens, who are audiences that would be engaged by “Troop Information” and “Public Information”. The doctrine explicitly provided among the “Limitations” section in countering propaganda that it is not NATO PSYOPS responsibility to directly address NATO forces and citizens [AJP-3.10.1(A), 2007, p. D-4]. The 2014 NATO PSYOPS doctrine does not include this provision. It states that in countering propaganda PSYOPS will make recommendations and where the situation dictates so, it will act in order to exploit “fleeting opportunities”. The 2014 NATO doctrine delimits between defensive and offensive counterpropaganda, mentioning for the first (through a footnote) that outside of a military operation, Public Affairs are responsible to counter messages that are hostile to NATO (AJP-3.10.1, pp. 1-9).

NATO PSYOPS doctrine follows the NATO policy on PSYOPS, which is defined in the decisions of NATO Military Committee no. 402. NATO Military Committee decision no. 402/1 from 2003 defined PSYOPS role as follows: “to influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour of target audiences, be it selected individuals or groups, with the goal of achieving political or military objectives, whilst preventing the effective use of these activities against own forces. Simply stated successful PSYOPS weakens the will of an adversary, reinforces the feelings and stimulates the cooperation of the loyal and sympathetic, and gains support of the uncommitted” (Military Decision on MC 0402/1, 2003, p. 2). At the same time, in the limitations sections it contained the provision according to which “NATO Commanders can conduct crisis response psychological operations (CRPO) and combat psychological operations (CPO) but will not target the international press, NATO/coalition nations, allied/coalition forces, or civilian audiences outside of the JOA” (Military Decision on MC 0402/1, p. 7), adding that the potential impact on unintended audiences must be considered. The limitation is not included in the decision of the NATO Military Committee



no. 402/2 from 2012 (which preceded the 2014 NATO PSYOPS doctrine) where it is provided that NATO Commanders will “conduct PSYOPS only with respect to NAC approved audiences, the possible impact on unintended audiences must be taken into account” (Military Decision on MC 0402/2, p. 6) and PSYOPS role is also differently defined: “The role of Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) is to induce or reinforce the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour of (NAC) approved audiences in support of the Alliance political and military objectives. Additionally, PSYOPS can mitigate the effective use of hostile propaganda against friendly forces, local civilian audiences and other audiences of importance to NATO” (Ib., p. 2). This definition implies that psychological operations in actions that are meant to counter propaganda could target domestic audiences. The NATO policies on PSYOPS provided in 2003 that “whilst NATO PSYOPS forces and assets may be used in the analysis of an adversary’s psychological activities, they only have the responsibility for addressing approved target audiences” (Military Decision on MC 0402/1, p. 8), whereas in 2012 counter-propaganda is defined as “a multidisciplinary effort led and coordinated by Info Ops function (...) Themes stressed in the adversary’s propaganda activities are identified and then possibly countered in a multidisciplinary effort (...) NATO PSYOPS forces and assets take a lead role in the analysis of the adversary’s propaganda and support counteractions” (Military Decision on MC 0402/2, p. 7).

The 2016 psychological operations doctrine of the Romanian Armed Forces included, similarly as the 2007 NATO PSYOPS doctrine and the 2007 version of the Romanian doctrine, the provision according to which influence operations will not be conducted on internal audiences, thus not adapting its provisions to the 2014 NATO doctrine, that eliminated it. It cannot be excluded that the doctrine of other NATO member states – like the 2013 US doctrine, may have been considered in deciding to keep the provision. Even so, the PSYOPS doctrine of the Romanian Armed Forces mentions that in counter-propaganda, PSYOPS responsibility will be to make recommendations and act directly when the situation dictates so – an unclear provision that is probably adopted from the 2014 NATO PSYOPS doctrine, where there is the reference to exploiting “fleeting opportunities”.

If from the perspective of the citizens’ rights and liberties not influencing the domestic audience is an ethical matter, difficulties arise

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in defining purely informative communication strategies, which are as powerful as the adversary's propaganda that engages the citizens of a state in a crisis or conflict situation. In this scenario, the adversary's messages will be tailored to target individuals and groups that are susceptible to influence, exploiting their vulnerabilities to achieve the desired behaviours. Not engaging those audiences and not using the same influence techniques, or *"not fighting with weapons of the same calibre"*, in this context – own persuasive messages –, from ethical reasoning, reduces the chances of executing an efficient counter-propaganda by the forces that are destined to do so. Consequently, an ethical provision may constitute a weakness that offers advantages to the enemy in the information environment confrontation. Consequently, to counter propaganda, in the absence of other *"weapons"* to be used by the military specialists, the best practice would be to limit the exposure of the audience to propagandistic messaging.

For the US PSYOPS, the vision of targeting foreign audiences through MILINFO (influence operations) is not only plausible, but the main employment of the PSYOPS specialists. But even in the USA, after the interference of the Russian Federation in the 2016 elections, the need for optimising the efforts conducted on the four instruments of national power – DIME/ Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic is being discussed increasingly more, in order to impede the external influence on the domestic public (DuVal, Maisel, 2017), even if this will not be achieved through the military instrument. The model of *"not engaging internal audiences"* is inefficient in situations of potential conflict for Romania, in which the adversary is conducting a hybrid war, targeting the Romanian citizens with PSYOPS. For Romania, considering the limitations in employing PSYOPS, the most efficient way to counter the propaganda of the adversary would be to restrict the access of the audiences to sources that disseminate such messages, so that the need to target the domestic public with messages constructed with influence techniques does not arise. The limitation is not a sufficient measure, as the information environment where potential adversaries act is *"unconstrained"*. As much as the attempt to restrict channels that are known as propaganda vectors is conducted, the population still has access to high-speed internet and unlimited resources. At the same time, countering fake news alone with correct information proves to be inefficient, as the adversary has the advantage of making

“the first move” which leads to cognitive biases among the audience (Reisher, Jacobs, Beasley, ib.).

To lead an efficient counter-propaganda, in many cases there is a need to target the audiences that are susceptible to the influence of the adversary with persuasive messages that would counter the opponent. This would be done after an analysis on their opportunity and complementary to information activities if the later are considered sufficient. In other terms, if the propagandistic actions of the adversary have the potential to determine certain groups in the society to conduct destabilising actions that could affect “the will of the majority”, the way in which these groups could be targeted with influence operations needs rethinking. The modification of the NATO PSYOPS doctrine, between the 2007 and 2014 versions, seems to have left an open door to targeting internal audiences, even if the provision is rather implicit through the elimination of the limitations that were clearly stated previously. The PSYOPS doctrine of the Romanian armed forces should also reflect a more realistic approach of the PSYOPS response to adversary propaganda, being clear and specific about the role played by PSYOPS in countering propaganda, the audiences that can be targeted in this context and the methods that are to be employed.

### THE GREY AREA BETWEEN “INFORM” AND “INFLUENCE”

Setting boundaries between “informing” and “influencing” is also a difficult *démarche*. According to Alex Mucchielli “any attempt to communicate is an attempt to influence” (Deac, Roşcan, p. 16), as the communicator seeks to produce effects. Consequently, a sharp separation between the two is almost impossible.

The function of “informing” the society is ensured for the most part by mass-media, which has assumed the role of a “watch dog” (Coman et al., 2005, p. 89) in ensuring the right of the citizens to be informed, defined by the article 31 of the Romanian Constitution as “The right of a person to have access to any information of public interest” (The Constitution of Romania, Art. 31). At the same time the constitutional provisions state that both private and public mass-media have the obligation to “ensure the correct information of the public opinion” (ib.). In order to establish what constitutes “public interest” mass-media makes a selection in prioritising the subjects



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that represent “*media events*”. If the event is defined as “*any happening from the environment with a certain significance for an individual or group*” (Roșca, 2006, pp. 113-114), the information represents, in relation to the event, “*shaping the reality*” (Ib.), a process that is subject to selecting the facts. The rules of journalism name certain criteria that guides the journalists in selecting the subjects of public interest, as follows: “*temporal proximity (topicality), spatial proximity (geographical), the unusual in the happenings, involved personalities, consequences, conflict, human interest*” (Ib.). These rules cannot eliminate though the subjectivity in the process of ranking the news. Mass-media holds the role of a “*gatekeeper*” (Communication Theory), influencing in a considerable manner what is brought to public attention. Mass-media, like any other industry is not exempted from “*the gains logic*”. Consequently, interests of economic, political or other nature play an important role on the altering the rules of the profession. The approach of news is also influenced by a series of organisational factors. Bruce D. Itule and Douglas A. Anderson name the factors as being the following: the instincts of the journalist (intuition), the audience of a media institutions, the space available for publication, the quantity of news that is available, the editorial policy, the pressures instilled by the owner of the media asset, the influence of the companies that buy advertising space, the editorial formula and the competition between press institutions (Coman et al., pp. 47-48). Even so, many mass-media channels claim they have the role of an “*ally*” or an “*accomplice*” of the public, in the relation of the public with the state, relying on the dissatisfaction of the citizens towards the political representatives. Thus, on a daily basis, the audience is rather subject to being influenced and less informed through mass-media means, while the media consumption is decisive for shaping perceptions, attitudes and behaviour.

Inform and influence activities (IIA), planned in a military context by the USA are delimited in the MISO manual through their graphic representation on “*the influence continuum*” where a separation is made between two lines of effort, inform and influence, where the axis represents: horizontally – the level of control over the information, and vertically – the level of psychological pressure applied on the audience (figure no. 1).

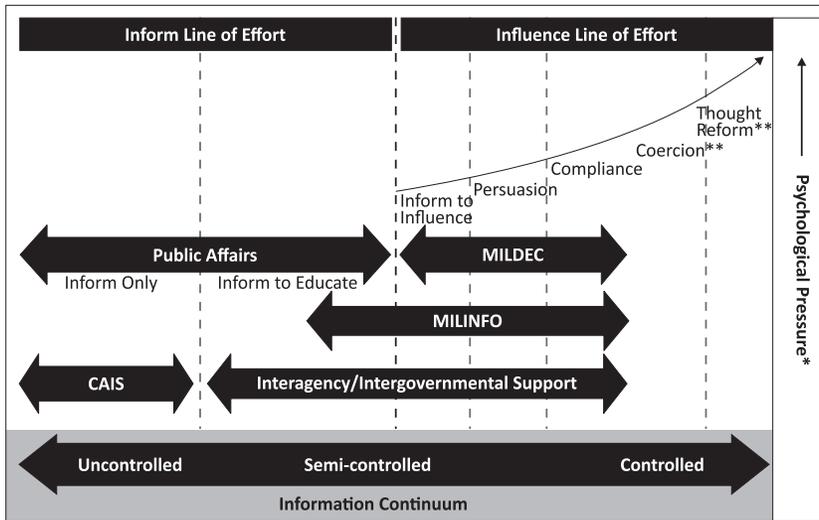


Figure no. 1: MISO on Inform and Influence lines of effort (FM 3-53, 2013, pp.1-8)



To respect the doctrinal provisions on influence operations, counter-propaganda efforts should be led only through “inform to educate” or “inform only” activities, in order to avoid employing influence operations when engaging the domestic audience. The disadvantage in these two approaches is that education is achieved in time, while “purely informing” is less efficient than propaganda, being dependent on the informational and cultural baggage of each individual.

The graphical representation shows that the activity “inform” has more nuances. “Semi-controlled” information has a purpose in essence, translated in educating and then influencing. Persuasion follows as a subsequent step, involving a higher level of control on the information and a higher level of psychological pressure on the audience. In this context, counter-propaganda actions could be placed in the area of “inform to influence”, but this already includes a certain level of control on the information and a certain level of psychological pressure on the audience. To respect the doctrinal provisions on influence operations, counter-propaganda efforts should be led only through “inform to educate” or “inform only” activities, in order to avoid employing influence operations when engaging the domestic audience. The disadvantage in these two approaches is that education is achieved in time, while “purely informing” is less efficient than propaganda, being dependent on the informational and cultural baggage of each individual. Thus, by employing persuasion techniques, or through a communication that is planned to influence, psychological operations would be conducted on the domestic audience, contrary to the current doctrinal provisions.



## CONCLUSIONS

Inform and influence activities need further clarification in future doctrines that regulate these fields of activity, by formulating adequate counter-propaganda strategies. Moreover, the limitations imposed in the doctrine on psychological operations need reconsideration. The principles stated in the doctrine should be formulated starting from hypothetical conflict scenarios in which Romania could be involved, and subsequent training activities should reflect the potential threats to the national security of Romania. If this is translated in establishing an ethical code or a “*deontology on psychological operations*” under which domestic audiences could be employed, defining the limitations should start from Romania’s Constitution. The constitutional provisions that can be defended through military force, as well as the situations when this would be needed, could represent the larger frame to legitimise the employment of PSYOPS on groups susceptible to influence, among the domestic audience, in support of the multidisciplinary effort of countering propaganda. Such an approach of psychological operations would be more realistic, effective, and clear for the specialists that operate in the field and for the commanders whose conventional war actions will be supported through PSYOPS.

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