

# The Problem of Corruption in the Countries of Southeastern Europe

Ratomir Antonović

Institute for Serbian Culture Priština - Leposavić, Republic of Serbia

The problem of corruption represents one of the biggest and most dangerous social, legal and security challenges of today, which is especially present in countries that are going through the transition process. We are talking about countries that until recently were organized according to the principles of communism and socialism, and then, after global changes, transitioned to a capitalist arrangement, which also caused numerous accompanying problems and difficulties. Corruption is certainly one of those problems. The countries of Southeast Europe have struggled, and are still struggling, with the dangerous problem of corruption. Hardly acceptable changes and resistance to them still allow corruption to be maintained and persist, despite serious efforts to eradicate it, or at least put it within reasonable limits.

*Keywords:* corruption, economic crisis, political crisis, European integration, security

## Introduction

Corruption today, at the global and international level, is one of the ubiquitous problems. It is difficult to fight and suppress it, because it has a strong base and a long tradition. It is a wrong approach that corruption is a product of modern times and that it is the result of some general erosion of both people and circumstances. From a historical point of view, corruption has always existed, even in ancient times, where corruption was promoted and extended by the leading and ruling cadres, when it was considered a normal occurrence, so to speak, until today. The only thing that has changed is the attitude towards it, because its harmful sides, negative side effects and legal problems, which it brings with it and causes, have been noticed.

What must be emphasized is that today corruption is more prevalent in poorer countries with a weak or underdeveloped legal system of sanctions against these corrupt phenomena. Also, it is more present in countries that are in the transition process, countries that are transitioning from a socialist to a capitalist system and that want to integrate into the European Union and other international institutions (Sekulović, 2000). In such a process, a new layer of social, political, financial and cultural elite was born, which is distinguished from the masses by financial power and the ability to get everything they want, to manage social, political and economic processes and have a decisive influence on them. Such persons are often ready to emphasize their influence publicly, and they tend to use and highlight their social power and reputation, thus further strengthening their position and creating in the general public a sense of their supremacy and omnipotence. Along with such persons who have this kind of influence, there are strong and very influential social and political connections in almost all social segments, especially in the most influential ones, such as internal affairs bodies, judicial

bodies, state and local self-government bodies, public companies, health institutions, educational institutions and other institutions of general and public importance. Such persons are often, to a large extent, themselves performing some of the functions in the aforementioned bodies, and from that function they derive the mentioned social reputation, because they often refer to the reputation of the institution in which they are employed or appointed to a certain function and offer their services in that institutions. Those and such services are mostly from the corpus of their activities that they perform, but they represent illegal jobs, which are mostly performed with a certain material compensation, which is why corrupt actions are carried out. This form of corruption is carried out through trade in influence, as a special type of corruption, in which the main actors are persons with special social reputation and influence, who materialize their reputation and influence in this way through the performance of certain actions with monetary compensation (Antonović, 2017a).

All those countries that plead to become an equal member of the European Union must inevitably harmonize their normative acts, as well as the principles of functioning with the principles of the European Union. Many countries that received candidate status also received guidelines and instructions on what they must undertake, change and eliminate in their systems, so that tomorrow they can be an equal member of the EU, with all the prerogatives that membership implies. Regarding corruption, the level of caution in the European Union was particularly raised after the admission of the countries of South-Eastern Europe, which still have the highest rate of corruption and which still damage the image of European countries in the overall constellation.

### **The Problem of Corruption in Serbia**

According to the report of the organization “Transparency International” for the previous year, the Republic of Serbia was ranked 101st on the list of corrupt countries. The list of observed countries included a total of 180 countries, and Serbia’s position did not change drastically in the previous decade. Although the Serbian authorities are working intensively on the adoption of anti-corruption regulations and their implementation, there have been no concrete results in this area. According to the aforementioned report, Serbia is among the worst-ranked countries in Southeast Europe. Only Bosnia and Herzegovina has a worse position, which is in 110th place, while Albania shares the position with Serbia (Joković Pantelić, 2024).

The organization “Transparency International” gives countries an index of perceptions of corruption, which can range from zero, which means that the country is highly corrupt, to 100, which means that the country is free from corruption. Therefore, the lower the index, the higher the level of corruption and vice versa. The Republic of Serbia is indexed with index 36. In the Republic of Serbia, there is a National Strategy for the fight against corruption for the period 2023-2028, and the public is reported on the achieved results of the fight against corruption on an annual basis. The Report on the sectors that are under special attention in the process of adopting the National Strategy for the fight against corruption is particularly interesting. This document monitors sectoral corruption, which is particularly represented in the following areas: health, education, tax service, customs, police, local self-government, public sector, infrastructure and spatial planning, work of political parties, privatization process, public procurement process, lobbying and whistleblower protection.

The healthcare sector is the sector where corruption is most prevalent. Although certain advances have been made, there is still a lack of legislation in this area, which should be harmonized with European legislation and standards that apply in European healthcare, both in terms of patients’ rights and the provision of healthcare services.

Of the concrete results in the fight against corruption in health care, we can mention the proceedings initiated against certain doctors and officials in the health sector. However, the Serbian mentality is such that ordinary people like to “reward” doctors with various gifts, but also with money. In the common man, there is a feeling that the doctor is owed something based on the service he has rendered to him as part of his job for which he is duly paid. It is believed that one should not go to the doctor without a bottle of pizza and an envelope with money. Precisely, such an attitude makes the fight against corruption difficult and indicates that within the framework of both fights, it is necessary to change the attitude of people towards healthcare in Serbia.

Also, in Serbian healthcare, there is a big problem of non-transparent procedures, which opens a suitable ground for various frauds and illegal activities. There are also no statistical data that can be used to evaluate the level of corruption and determine the parameters of the existence of corruption and the level of corruption. It must be noted that corruption has decreased to a significant extent, but there is still room for efforts to reduce corruption to a minimum.

When talking about corruption in the education sector, there is a need to harmonize Serbian and European legislation. First of all, this alignment should ensure opportunities for cross-border education. The strategy observes particularly corrupt capacities in the accreditation processes of private educational institutions in Serbia, and these processes are not sufficiently transparent and leave opportunities for various abuses. Also, at private educational institutions, there is a lack of clarity and visibility of the exam application procedure, student registration, exam taking procedures, evaluation criteria and student knowledge assessment are unclear and non-transparent. There are indications that the level of corruption in education in the Republic of Serbia has decreased, although this country was the scene of one of the biggest corruption scandals in the field of education at the Faculty of Law of the University of Kragujevac, when a large number of professors, students and non-teaching staff were deprived of their freedom. Unfortunately, even to this day, this court proceeding has not received its legally binding epilogue.

In the case of tax policy, the non-transparency of the budget can be seen as a potential corrupt element. The transformation of the tax service in Serbia is necessary, especially in the area of taxation, ensuring better tax collection, the fight against the gray economy, as well as harmonizing the policy of value added tax and direct taxation with European standards. It is necessary to introduce public consultations, especially for specific fiscal secondary legislation and services related to taxpayers (Fjeldstadt, 2008). In the tax sector, there is an absence of public information, there are elements of unjust enrichment, the problem of tax evasion, there are weaknesses in penal policies in the area of tax offenses, and tax measures are not included in the action plans.

In the area of customs, in the Republic, the lack of precise provisions on customs procedures and an integrated system for managing this type of risk is detected as a risk of corruption. The information technologies that are introduced into the customs system contribute to a better integration of customs procedures at the national level, as well as harmonization with the regulations that are applied in the European Union. Likewise, it is observed that not all adequate measures in the field of tax policy, foreseen in the action plan, have been fully implemented.

In the public procurement sector, there is a lack of control mechanisms, i.e. the existence of ineffective control mechanisms. There is a lot of evasion of legal regulations in public procurement, as well as evasion of regulations dictated by the European Union. Evasion is most often done by insisting on linear infrastructure projects, which are exempt from public procurement rules. Also, politics has a decisive influence on the public

procurement procedure, which makes these procurements even more corrupt. In addition to political pressures, there are also other forms of informal pressure, resulting from the “fixing” of tenders and tender documents according to the needs of privileged tender participants. Also, tenders are announced for unnecessary purchases, without supervision or with inadequate supervision regarding the implementation of the contract. There are contracts of secret content, which have not been presented to the public. This enables the conclusion of contracts that are not acceptable content and prevents public criticism and control by regulatory bodies (Prokopijević, 2011).

In these public-private relations, there is a problem of conflicts of interest, which are manifested through various concessions. Official agreements are preceded by informal agreements and internal agreements, modification of tenders according to the needs of privileged bidders, as well as their capabilities. This undoubtedly leads to a reduction in the number of legitimate offers and discourages participation in public tenders. As a special problem, the lack of information that is necessary for all participants to be adequately informed about the tender itself and its outcome should be highlighted.

The process of privatization or ownership transformation, as it was originally called, left behind numerous corruption scandals in which many high government officials participated. In Serbia, there were as many as 24 open problematic privatization processes, which greatly agitated the public. The epilogue of these processes has not been transparently published and is unknown to most. It is about the following disputed privatizations: Sartida from Smederevo, Jugoremedija from Belgrade, Mobtel, C market, Auto transport company Vojvodina, Luke Belgrade, National Savings Bank, Večernje Novosti, Veterinary Institute in Zemun, Zastava elektro from Kragujevac, Tehnohemija, Srbolek, Šinvoz, Ceramics from Kanjiža, Publishing company Prosveta, Azotare Pančevo, Trudbenik gradne, Nuba Invest, Tourist company Putnik, Serbia Tourist and Galenika from Zemun (Antonović, 2017b).

Currently, the procedure of ownership transformation in the media sector is underway, which aims to achieve media pluralism and preserve the independence of the media, both in the editorial and financial sense. Privatization of media that have a minority character, which are related to the national councils of national minorities, is particularly sought. The European Union recommends the Republic of Serbia to continue with the privatization process, which implies the implementation of a time-bound action plan for the introduction of new ownership and a new management structure in state-owned enterprises and the improvement of management, as well as the reduction of fiscal risks. The previous privatization procedure was conducted inadequately, poorly and non-transparently. It is precisely because of this that there has been a significant stagnation in privatization, and state enterprises have been put in a significantly less favorable position on the modern regulated market.

Infrastructure and spatial planning have a risk of corruption, especially in the area of waste management, which is regulated by the National Waste Management Program in the period from 2022 to 2031 and the action period from 2022 to 2024. Failures in the field of waste recycling are recognized, as well as the need for harmonization with European legislation. Special corruption risks are observed in the procedures for issuing permits and licenses for construction, and it is often the case that these permits and licenses are issued in violation of the permitted use of the land. Corruption risks are also visible in the determination of pollution taxes and are reflected in the bribery of civil servants when classifying waste and giving false categories, and a special danger arises when dealing with particularly risky waste, dangerous to the environment and people. Inspectors who accept bribes in order not to punish environmental polluters are especially vulnerable to corruption.

The Republic of Serbia does not show significant progress in the area of passing regulations for the protection of the environment, and the lack of harmonization of criminal legislation and the introduction of new incriminations for acts that damage the environment stand out as particularly controversial. Adequate environmental risk assessments are not performed during the construction of certain industrial or infrastructure facilities. In general, the construction sector is considered a sector that is heavily influenced by politics and corruption (Beočanin, 2022).

There is also corruption in the field of public sector management, especially in the matter of informal influences and nepotism in the selection and appointment to public positions in publicly owned companies. Inadequate methods regarding the introduction of internal integrity management functions and the lack of publicly available information regarding anti-corruption measures undertaken in the public sector are also observed. Also, there is no necessary coordination between state authorities regarding the application of anti-corruption measures. There is an accumulation of state functions performed by state officials, and as the most frequent perpetrators of abuse in the public sector, temporary public function holders who have the status of acting officials are detected. The selection process for high management positions is highly debatable, and there is no transparent procedure, which would entail the announcement of a public competition and the selection of candidates based on professional qualifications, not political suitability.

High taxes in the public sector are considered to be one of the risks of corruption. A lot still needs to be done in this sector in order to ensure better predictability of the business environment and to ensure the direct participation of companies in legal regulation and the introduction of entrepreneurship strategies and policies and the redirection of budget funds for the needs of foreign investment incentives and technical support. There is a lack of harmonized codes of ethics that would review possible violations of regulations as well as time-bound action plans for the introduction of new ownership structures and new management structures in state-owned enterprises, with the aim of reducing fiscal risks.

Corruption in the local self-government sector arises due to the lack of reform of the local self-government system. Codes of ethics concerning local officials have been adopted in 144 local governments in order to prevent behavior that could be related to corruption. Also, it is insisted on establishing a body for monitoring the risk of corruption at the level of local self-governments.

When it comes to high judicial bodies, such as the High Council of the Judiciary, their selection must be done in a transparent manner and the most eminent lawyers in the country must be in those positions. At the local government level, it is necessary to adopt local plans for the fight against corruption, as well as to establish authorities whose competence would be to monitor possible corruption at the level of the local community. In this area, transparency of revenues belonging to local self-governments must be ensured in order to prevent corruption related to tax policy. Also, the costs of local authorities in the implementation of infrastructure projects must be transparent.

### **The Problem of Corruption in Romania**

Although a member of the European Union, Romania is considered a highly corrupt country, where corruption leads to the loss of human lives. Failures that occur in various segments of social life, which are a direct result of corruption in society, cause various accidents and disasters in which ordinary citizens lose their lives. An example that confirms this negative phenomenon is the event from 2023, when there was an accident at a gas station near Bucharest, when more than fifty people were seriously injured.

Although the citizens of Krevedija duly reported to the authorities that they smelled a strong smell of gas in their place, and that there might be danger on the horizon, the authorities did not want to take any action because they were corrupted by the management of the gas station. It is about an illegal gas station, built on private property, where citizens came to fill their vehicles with auto gas. In addition to cars, bottles for private heating systems were also filled. Although in 2020 the inspection determined that the gas station was operating illegally and prohibited its further operation, the owners of the gas station ignored the ban and continued to operate illegally.

The accident at the disputed gas station was caused by the ignition of the gas that was being dispensed. The cause of the accident is still unknown today, and it is assumed that the unfortunate event occurred due to the embers from a cigarette or due to extremely high air temperatures. First, the gas tank exploded, followed by tanks and compressed gas barrels. There were several consecutive explosions, and people were injured the most when they came to help the injured after the first explosion. Subsequent explosions endangered the lives of all who came to help the injured.

Here the example of corruption is crystal clear. There were reports that the illegal activity of the gas station was taking place in the mentioned place, the inspection imposed a work ban, but the owners of the illegal gas station did not want to obey the orders, but continued to work. The reason for their disregard for the prohibitions was found in strong contacts and corruption by which they ensured themselves a privileged status.

Unfortunately, examples of corruption in Romania are visible at every step. In healthcare, mortality is very high due to the corruption of medical and non-medical personnel. The public was particularly shaken by the news of the death of a twenty-five-year-old pregnant woman, already a mother of three minor children, who died in the hospital due to inadequate treatment after admission. Although she was admitted with severe pain and bleeding, no one provided her with adequate medical assistance for seven hours. None of the doctors on duty wanted to help her, because no one gave them the expected bribe. Just a few weeks before this terrible event, the hospital refused to admit a pregnant woman before giving birth, so she gave birth on the street in front of the hospital without anyone's help. In addition to the suspicion of corruption, in this case there was also a suspicion of racism and discrimination, because the woman in labor belonged to the Roma population (Nita, Nafornita, Bogeia, & Lupascu, 2022).

There is also corruption and negligence in the work of the Romanian police. A fifteen-year-old girl, who was abducted by a kidnapper, managed to get hold of a mobile phone and call the police in order to report the kidnapping. The police officer who responded to her call refused to act on it, and the girl was soon deprived of her life. Corruption in the Romanian police is particularly prevalent in traffic control. This is evidenced by the recent case of traffic control in a tourist town on the Black Sea. Although he passed the control by the traffic police, the driver, clearly under the influence of narcotics, ran into a small group of tourists with his vehicle and killed two people.

That Romania has a problem with corruption is clearly indicated by the affair that contributed to the downfall of Prime Minister Victor Ponta's government in 2015. The reason for the fall is a terrible tragic event in which 32 people lost their lives, which was a direct consequence of corruption and negligence. The people began to organize demonstrations with one demand, which is political and criminal responsibility for those responsible for the tragedy. The accident happened in the night club "Kolectiv" in Bucharest, in which there was a fire in which 32 young people lost their lives, and 200 of them were seriously injured. The fire occurred due to inadequate handling of pyrotechnics, which first ignited the ceiling, which fell on the guests. There was

only one exit for evacuation, which was not enough for all the guests of the night club. In panic and fear for their own lives, there was a stampede in which some were additionally endangered and some lost their lives in this way.

### **The Problem of Corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

In the region of Southwestern Europe, the worst ranked country in terms of corruption is Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only in this country is a significant decline compared to the previous rating, and of the European countries, only Ukraine and Russia have a worse position than Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paradox is that Bosnia and Herzegovina was far better placed in 2012 than it is now, which indicates that this country did not undertake anything to improve the situation, but on the contrary, worked to worsen the situation. The reasons for such a decline are both objective and subjective in nature. Namely, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-confessional country where different cultures collide. Ethnic divisions represent a stumbling block for democratic institutions, especially in the fight against corruption.

The Bosnian judiciary is the most damaged by corrupt practices. Instead of being a means of judging organized crime, the Bosnian judiciary is subordinated to criminal structures to the extent that judges judge on the orders of local criminals and practically receive compensation from them for this kind of work (Simović, 2023). As an example of the illegal work of the Bosnian courts, we should cite the trial in the case of “Bobar Bank”, where the defendants, in addition to irrefutable evidence, were acquitted, only because they could obtain such a verdict for themselves through corrupt actions and influence.

The political life of Bosnia and Herzegovina is also exposed to various corrupt influences, which can best be manifested through irregular election procedures. The general elections that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2022 were held in an atmosphere of electoral irregularities and misuse of state resources. Here, the imposition of the law on elections by the High Representative appears as a problem, which in a perfidious way wanted to reshape the electoral will of the citizens. Practically, since then, there has been a political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, because some government institutions are blocked, and some act as an instrument of certain political parties.

Although it aspires to membership in the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not done much to achieve the 14 priorities of social reforms, which the European Union set as a condition for equal membership. In fact, it can be said that the reform of Bosnian society was completely absent, because nothing was done regarding the reform of the electoral system, the issue of financing political parties and organizations was not regulated, the issue of the existence of conflicts of interest, the protection of corruption whistleblowers was not regulated, and it notes that under the pretext of reforms, they offer laws with worse content than the currently valid laws.

Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina is discussing the draft of the Good Governance Agenda, which offers an innovative approach to solving social problems that have their cause in the ethno-nationalist ideas of the ruling political elites. The agenda contains a set of measures aimed at fighting corruption while freeing it from the harmful effects of politics, which is marked as the biggest corruption risk. In this regard, the Agenda proposes systemic functional audits of the public sector, with the aim of its optimization, centralization of public procurement, integration of the electoral process and bringing the work of political parties under control.

### **The Problem of Corruption in Albania**

Albania is a country that also faces numerous difficulties on the way to the European Union and the reform of all social sectors. In Albanian society, the judiciary is considered the most corrupt part of society because with the arrest of former Albanian President Salja Berisha, the entire network of corrupt judges and prosecutors was exposed. Reform of the judiciary is exactly something that the European Union, but also the USA insist on in Albania with the desire that this country adapts as best as possible for full membership in the European Union.

As a positive development in dealing with corruption, the accusation of the President of Albania, Salja Berisha, that he was involved in corrupt activities, and the measure of house arrest for the duration of 30 days was imposed on him. He is accused of abusing his official position, even during the period when he was Prime Minister from 2005 to 2009, and the most problematic event was the suspicious privatization of a sports facility in Tirana, in which the closest members of Berisha's family were involved. Of course, the defense was focused on dismissing the applications and trying to move the ball into the political field.

Salji Berisha was a long-time Albanian leader. It was born in the period of communism, when it was considered the young hope of Albanian politics. In the first free democratic elections in Albania, held in 1992, Berisha was elected President of Albania. The first indications of Berisha's corruption came in 2001, when confidential information about his involvement in certain illegal affairs came from the USA. The US blacklists him as a corrupt leader and bans him from entering. It was an introduction to the later processes in which Berisha was included.

By the way, Albania is the country of Southeast Europe where the transition process lasts the longest, over thirty years. In the past, it was considered the most backward European state, where there were absolutely no human and civil rights, a country that was completely closed to any external influences, where traditional customary rights and tyranny were still valid. Exactly, in this fact we should look for reasons why corruption in Albania is such a domesticated phenomenon and why Albanian society still resists any democratic change. The changes that have taken place in Albania are not going in the desired direction, but towards the creation of an oligarchic system in which personal interests are above general interests.

Also, Berisha is not the only Albanian leader who has been deprived of his freedom due to corruption. Iljir Meta, the former President of Albania, was deprived of his liberty due to suspicions that he was involved in certain corrupt and illegal activities. He was engaged in corrupt and money laundering activities during the period when he was performing the duties of the Prime Minister, the President of the State and the President of the Parliament. It is speculated that Meta was discovered in these affairs by his ex-wife at the time of the divorce of their marriage. By the way, Meta is a close associate of Salji Berisha, who supported him after the corruption scandal broke out and tried to shift the focus to politics again. However, truth be told, Meta's name did not appear for the first time then, but ten years before, when he persuaded the then Minister of Economy, Dritan Pifti, to do an illegal job in connection with the construction of a hydro power plant, in which they were supposed to illegally acquire around 700 thousand euros. Also, his name was involved in abuses related to election theft, which then cost him the position of Speaker of the Parliament (Zhillia, 2008).

On the issue of corruption in the Albanian judiciary, the recent gesture of rigorously checking the property cards of judges and holders of judicial positions has raised the hope that reforms in the Albanian judiciary have begun. Due to concealment of property cards, as many as 45 percent of judges and prosecutors in Albania lost their jobs. These judges and prosecutors were found to have intentionally concealed information from property maps, changed already reported information, and tried to conceal the origin of property, which indicated that

they owned property of dubious origin.

### **Conclusions**

The paper analyzes cases of corruption in four countries of Southeast Europe—the Republic of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Romania. Of the four countries where the issue of corruption was treated, three have the status of candidates for membership in the European Union, while Romania is already an equal member of the European Union, but still has a problem with corruption.

Using the analytical method, it was concluded that the problem of corruption is acute in all four countries, with different approaches and relationships in solving that problem. Corruption in all four countries erodes the vital postulates on which a democratic society rests, namely the judiciary, the protection of basic human and civil rights, free political competition, the principles of the rule of law, but it is also treated as a security risk. Security is particularly damaged by corruption in Romania, where corruption manifested itself in the most severe forms, which resulted in the loss of human lives. Due to corruption, state bodies whose main task is to protect the safety of citizens are not doing their job well. As a result of omissions as a direct consequence of corruption, human victims are counted in Romania.

The Republic of Serbia has strategic documents that state the problems in society from corruption with specific proposals for measures that should be taken in order to remedy these problems. The international factor that evaluates the progress in the fight against corruption does not see significant progress in Serbia in the fight against corruption, although different measures are evidently being taken. Compared to the situation a decade ago, when dubious transitions were implemented and there were many dubious deals involving illegally acquired capital, today the situation is much better, although further progress is expected and higher standards are being set.

It can be said that the situation is the worst in Bosnia and Herzegovina because this is the only country that records a decline in the table of countries with the degree of corruption. In this country, there are no basic regulations regulating the fight against corruption, there are no concrete measures and actions, and there is resistance in dealing with the problem of corruption. Almost all segments of society are under the influence of corruption, without concrete and decisive measures to oppose that same corruption.

The situation in Albania is also not good, but it can be said that this is the country with the largest number of state officials who have been deprived of their freedom due to criminal acts of corruption. Even two presidents of the state have been deprived of their freedom due to corruption, and a large number of holders of judicial positions have been dismissed from those positions due to the obvious concealment of their assets and their origin.

It is characteristic of all these countries that they had a communist system and that they entered the transition process at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties of the last century. That process was obviously difficult and with great problems in all those countries, and the difficulties are still visible today in many social segments. In the process of transition, there was the creation of dubious capital, which had its origins in illegal businesses, and which very successfully infiltrated state flows, creating the appearance that the origin of that money and property was legal. Also, a new social class was created, which some call tycoons, and it represents persons who have acquired great personal wealth in the name of illegal business in the process of property transformation, resale of state property and other similar business.

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