

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 23 Issue 2
February

Boris Popivanov



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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The war in Ukraine and its repercussions. For yet another month, Bulgarian foreign policy has to an enormous extent been dominated and framed by the international Russia-West tension caused by the war in Ukraine. The attitude towards these geopolitical processes stands firmly as the main dividing line in the Bulgarian political process in general.

The official position of Bulgaria has been expressed on various occasions by President Rumen Radev. At an extraordinary meeting of the European Council in Brussels, the head of state spoke out against further provision of military aid from Bulgaria to Ukraine and mentioned a possible veto of Sofia on new sanctions against Russia affecting nuclear supplies. In a statement before the Munich Security Conference, Radev called for a peaceful solution to the conflict, and at a summit of the B-9 countries in Warsaw in the presence of US President Joe Biden, he warned of the risks of military escalation upon peace in the whole of Europe. Back in Sofia, the Bulgarian President defined the supporters of additional military aid to Kiev as “parties of war”, which is a step forward after his previous definition of “warmongers”. Radev’s standpoint is based on two claims: that only peace negotiations, not weapons, can end war; and that the priority of Bulgaria is to arm its own army, not that of Ukraine. In the absence of a regular government, this is the line of Bulgaria. There was an attempt in the media to oppose Radev’s statements to the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but this was not successful.

Without any doubt, the course outlined in this way is different from that of the so-called “hawks” in the EU and NATO (especially Poland and the Baltic countries), but also from the vision of European institutions. However, it would be exaggerated to see Bulgaria as a pro-Russian “dissident” in Europe along with Viktor Orbán’s Hungary. Orbán appeals for cooperation with Russia and feels Europe is to blame for the conflict. On both issues, together with Brussels, Radev advocates the opposite position. The coincidence between Budapest and Sofia is on the subject of military aid, an extremely important issue, but not the only one. Not only did Radev personally sign the B-9 declaration

from Warsaw against Russia’s “bloody” and “aggressive” war against Ukraine. But a significant amount of the diplomatic efforts of Radev and his cabinet are aimed at deepening Bulgaria’s integration into the European space, and not at rapprochement with Russia (on the topics of “Schengen”, the “Eurozone” and “energy diversification”). Regardless of this, however, the image of the Bulgarian President as pro-Russian is starting to be permanently sown. This notion is also used in the political process.

Radev’s alleged pro-Russian course is at the basis of the idea of his early removal from office, so-called impeachment. For the first time, it was publicly launched by a political force claiming first place in the elections - the new alliance between “We Continue the Change” and “Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB). However this case unfolds, it is indicative of the range of domestic political uses of global politics. Here are three more examples. The first of them: February 1st is the Day of Honour for Victims of the Communist Regime. On this occasion, the journalist from the Bulgarian National Radio Petar Volgin expressed support for the People’s Court, associated with the communist repressions at the end of the Second World War. Protests “for” and “against” Volgin were organised. Since the journalist is widely perceived as pro-Russian, the protests ultimately reflected not on the problem of communism, but on the role of Russia in Bulgarian history. A similar thing happened again in connection with February 19th, the anniversary of the death of the Bulgarian national hero Vasil Levski. At the time, the media were flooded with commentary that treated Levski’s struggle for independence as a lesson in the need for independence from Russia today. Secondly, the USA announced a new list of Bulgarian officials who are sanctioned under the global “Magnitsky” Act on corruption. The list includes the former Minister of Finance from GERB Vladislav Goranov, the former Minister of Energy from BSP Rumen Ovcharov and the head of a Russophile non-governmental organisation Nikolay Malinov. Great Britain joined the sanctions, and the American sanctions coordinator James O’Brien arrived in Sofia. The scandal that ensued provoked not a discussion about corruption in

Bulgaria, but a dispute about the “malign Russian influence”. According to one assessment, those affected by the Magnitsky Act and critics of American behaviour in the case are united by their Russian affiliations: parties, prosecutors and media. According to the other assessment, the sanctions have the pragmatic goal of replacing the Russian presence in the Bulgarian energy sector with one that is American. And thirdly, the anniversary of the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine also gave rise to inter-party clashes. On the eve of the date, a citizen broke the plaque at the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia. In the subsequent statements, some of the parties (GERB before the others) insisted on the removal of the entire monument, and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) launched a petition for it to be preserved. The attitude towards the Soviet Army and the attitude towards the Putin regime merge into one. As can be seen, both on historical and current issues, the political debate in Bulgaria is oriented towards the Russia-West geopolitical division.

Bulgaria and the Balkans on the road to Europe.

After the decision of the European Council from December to postpone Bulgaria’s accession to the Schengen area, in February the Bulgarian Ministry of Finance announced that accession to the Eurozone would not be possible on the expected date of January 1st, 2024. Again, however, this is not an unequivocal failure. As in the case of Schengen, where at the official level in Brussels there was talk of a new date as early as 2023, so in the case of the Eurozone, the Vice-President of the European Commission, Valdis Dombrovskis, personally visited Sofia and indicated as a realistic goal accession a year later later, on January 1st, 2025. In both cases, everything depends on the adequacy of the Bulgarian legislative strategy and the effectiveness of Bulgarian diplomatic pressure. Polit-

ical unity in Bulgaria, however, does not seem to be apparent. The tragic incident with 18 migrants found dead in a truck on Bulgarian territory during an attempt to illegally cross into Western Europe gave rise to new criticisms, both from GERB and PP-DB, regarding the inability of the Bulgarian institutions to guard the border. Thus, a new shadow was cast on Bulgaria’s preparations for Schengen. Moreover, the postponed decision on the Eurozone was welcomed by parties such as “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”) and BSP. Their public initiatives allow us to assume that resistance to membership will grow not so much outside Bulgaria as within the borders of the country.

Balkan policy has traditionally been a priority commitment of the presidential institution over the last year. Ambitions are mainly focused on energy diversification, but also on transport connectivity and the exchange of views between separate countries on leading geopolitical topics. In the last month, the head of state Rumen Radev has visited Greece on the occasion of the renewed initiative for an oil pipeline between Burgas and Alexandroupolis and received the President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic in Sofia. As a sign of gratitude for the Bulgarian help in dealing with the consequences of the catastrophic earthquake in Turkey, President Recep Erdogan held a telephone conversation with Radev. Although it was clearly a protocol conversation, it still provides a new example of a warming in the relations between Radev and Erdogan, which had been frozen in 2017. The picture of Balkan activity would not be complete if we omitted the visits of Vice President Iliana Yotova to Kosovo and North Macedonia. In this case, encouragement for the European course of Pristina goes hand in hand with criticisms of Skopje, because they themselves are blocking their European integration with anti-Bulgarian demonstrations.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The President. With the dissolution of the 48th National Assembly, President Rumen Radev appointed another caretaker cabinet. This sequence had already happened in 2021. Then, however, figures from the first cabinet used their popularity to launch a new political project, PP. It became possible for this type of government to become an alternative field for the formation of a party. There are no such indications this time. Now Radev's caretaker cabinet is passing the baton to Radev's caretaker cabinet, and not leading to a new option for the development of the party system in the parliamentary republic. Therefore, unlike before, all the consequences of governance, both positive and negative, reflect directly on the authority of the President. First, public approval of him, although still impressively high, is declining - both because of socio-economic problems and because of Radev's open distance from some of the parties. Second, the President has relatively limited tools to influence this trend. Without a parliamentary majority and without an independent budget policy, it would be difficult for him to outline a way out of the crisis for the country in the long term. And third, the temptations for the parties to find an intersection of their contradictions in coordinated anti-presidential behaviour are increasing. Allegations of impeachment are only signals in this direction.

The government. The second cabinet of Galab Donev consciously refrained, like the first, from seeking an independent political profile. The areas where more activity is felt, such as foreign and security policy, energy and inflation, bear the imprint of the personal moves of the presidential institution and the resulting messages. Some of the ministers - for example of the economy and energy - are subjected to more and more serious criticism, which throws the political monolithic nature of the government out of kilter. For now, Prime Minister Donev is managing to control this with his moderation.

The Chief Prosecutor. The impressive media activity of the chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev has been channelled in two directions, already traditional for him - to present himself as a preferred partner of the

Western world, in particular the USA, and as the "last bastion" of the shaken constitutional and legal order in Bulgaria. This is how two of Geshev's main appearances can be read: a visit to Washington to participate in a "national prayer breakfast" with President Biden; and an investigation against senior officials of Kiril Petkov's government for supplying Russian gas at inflated prices. However, both served as counter-accusations against Geshev - that he was not actually invited to the "prayer breakfast" and that the prosecutor's office works selectively and very rarely against parties actually connected to Russia. The new sanctions under the "Magnitsky" Act do not help the international authority of the institution headed by Geshev. His battle against the chief prosecutor's investigative machinery seems self-serving and personal. The claims that the attempt to control an institution amounts to an "unconstitutional pogrom" are highly unconvincing. But apparently Geshev really fears that this mechanism, proposed by the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov, will put an end to his mandate. Only such an apprehension could explain the Attorney General's absurd address to the nation, in which he warned of the intentions of "politicians and oligarchs" to remove him from office. Geshev's refusal to participate in the discussion of the legislative changes and the unconditional support for Geshev personally in some media with attacks on his opponents do not do anything to consolidate the claim of principle.

Public opinion. Bulgarian society is faced with yet more parliamentary elections. At the launch of the campaign, it was interesting to note how the low interest of the voters is. A Gallup International survey identified only 40.7% as saying that they would definitely vote. One can hardly talk about re-politicisation in comparison with the alarmingly high levels of political apathy of last year.

In February, a traditionally dour winter month, the social and domestic problems of people come to the fore. An extreme amount of attention, also established by the media, has given rise to a series of comparisons between the prices of the same food in Bulgaria and other European countries. The comparison, as expect-

ed, is not favourable for Bulgaria. Against this background, one can understand the scandal with the director of the state-owned LB Bulgaricum, Nikolay Marinov, who announced lower prices of dairy products in his company stores and was later fired. So far, it is not possible to say for sure whether the reasons

for his dismissal were justified, or because of “the lobbying of retail chains”, but the numerous and fierce comments on the topic testify to the fact that for the majority of Bulgarians not only inflation, but also suspicions of speculation, are a primary problem that has been insufficiently addressed at the political level.

3

THE CONDITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The leading political force enters the election campaign striving, as expected, for first place once more. The tactics seem unchanged from what they were. The party again want to present themselves as a guarantor of “order” against the “chaos” of the last 2 years, threatening new pre-term elections if they do not win now. They will rely again on their traditional voters, as we can judge from the tours of leader Boyko Borisov in the country for meetings with party activists. He is bringing familiar faces back to the fore. There is hardly any other party with greater continuity. Of the 31 electoral regions, GERB are repeating their leaders of last year in the lists of no fewer than 28 of them; the three new leaders (in Vratsa, Pernik and Plovdiv-region) were also MPs in the former parliament, although elected not in first place. It is obvious that the expectations of the upcoming vote are not for some “breakthrough”, but rather for preserving the result, in the hope that the other parties will decline.

Despite the calmness and confidence demonstrated by GERB, the situation for them is not entirely stable. The party have failed in the main tasks they have been pursuing so far. First, GERB tried to split the “forces of change” by attracting “Democratic Bulgaria” to themselves. The experience turned out to be unsuccessful. DB entered the election coalition with the GERB opponents PP. Efforts are still ongoing with declarations of compromises made to candidates and initiatives of DB, but still without consequences. Secondly, GERB apparently wanted to prove that the Western partners of Bulgaria had no reason to doubt the loyalty of the party and Borisov. The new sanctions under the Magnitsky Act caused GERB to almost distance themselves from their sanctioned former Finance Minister Goranov. GERB again condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and declared themselves in favour of removing the Soviet Army Monument in Sofia. It appears that in GERB, they have decided that the judicial reform and the chances of political collaboration around it are a key goal of the United States. That is why party leader Borisov went as far as pointing out in one of his rare interviews recently how often he has visited the US Embassy and declared a willingness to support the

mechanism of investigation of the Chief Prosecutor, regardless of whether this is contrary to the Constitution(!). Rather, such statements belie political weakness. It is not without importance that if they want to avoid a coalition with the “forces of change” PP-DB, GERB will again face a BSP and MRF government, and this, just as in the last parliament, does not sound like an inspirational variant.

An additional difficulty facing GERB is generated by the approaching local elections. The party depends mainly on its position in local government. Signals that major changes are being prepared in mayoral nominations for the regional centres cannot but cause turmoil. We are already witnessing the first - the open conflict between Borisov and Mayor of Plovdiv Zdravko Dimitrov, who refused to resign from his post despite being asked to do so by his party leader. GERB’s dilemma as to whether they want a government now or in the autumn has not changed.

“We Continue the Change (“Produlzhavame Pro-mianata” - PP) - Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB). This is also the biggest news in the election campaign. The pre-election alliance between the two “forces of change” brings back the intrigue for the winner of the election and increases the importance of the campaign itself. The first sociological data, although conditional, point to the unification of the two electorates. Apparently PP and DB voters do not mind being together; the question is whether this will attract voters looking for change, but so far distanced because of the fragmentation of those promising change. Opposition to GERB is clearly expressed, as is confrontation with the President and the caretaker government. The very first declaration of the newly formed coalition directly attacked Radev and Galab Donev’s cabinet. The campaign slogan, “There is a way,” expresses optimism, once again different from GERB’s tired messages of stability. The document with the priorities of the unification contains 12 intentions, most of which show a general democratic character and are aimed at the rule of law. Only one, the fourth intention, is social and declares readiness to overcome social and regional inequalities. It can be concluded

that the profile of the coalition is close to that of DB. It gravitates more to the right-wing spectrum than to the centrist field. The fact that former BSP MP Yavor Bozhankov joined them should be interpreted not so much as opening doors to the left, but as a reaffirmation of the pro-Western line in the conflict in Ukraine. Even though it is moderate and seems natural, this movement to the right is there to see and constitutes one of the risks before attracting a wider periphery of voters.

The new union experienced some difficulties in arranging its lists for the elections, which is normal. Two case studies attracted media attention. There has been the removal from the lists of former MP Ivan Hristanov, who had become emblematic of the anti-corruption policy of PP with their decisive actions against the existing practices of the "Kapitan Andreevo" border crossing. Alexander Dunchev, who had become a symbol of the intransigence of the "forces of change" against the mafia schemes in the forest sector and who embodied the "green flank" of PP, also dropped out. Hence, PP are deprived of their blades, with which the public associated the fight against corruption not in words, but in deeds. When it comes down to it, the new union, like the parties composing it on October 2nd, is faced this year with the still unsolved problem of partnerships in the future parliament. It also creates some uncertainty regarding the potential of the "forces of change" to form a regular government.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). MRF are predictable in their strategy. As before, the party quite openly strive for the formation of a regular cabinet and their participation in it. The fragmentation of Bulgarian politics and the lack of stable blocs in it lead to the conclusion that the larger a parliamentary group is, the greater political weight it will have. This is why MRF are making huge efforts to increase support for themselves. The activity of their local leaders is extremely intense and explains why they hardly have time for media appearances. In the MRF perspective, both national and international factors are intertwined. On one hand, MRF officially declare their firm Euro-Atlanticism. On the other hand, a series of events, including the problems surrounding the judicial reform clearly show that MRF do not find a match between their agenda and the agenda of the Euro-Atlantic partners, and they do not receive positive signals from them. With such a reading, which is perhaps not alien to party strategists, two possibilities ensue. If MRF make their participation in a future cabinet arithmetically inevitable, this will also make MRF for Brussels and Washington inevitable.

An MRF government would stabilise MRF and weaken the other actors, who would reap electoral losses because of the anti-MRF identity they all stubbornly maintain. If a government is formed without MRF

or not formed at all, this would give an additional impetus to the opponents of the hard Euro-Atlantic line, especially "Vazrazhdane", although not only them, and MRF could once again assert themselves as an inevitable factor in political stability. In the current geopolitical conditions, the regional role of Turkey is becoming increasingly important. Thus, the relations of MRF with Turkey also gain priority. The initiative of honorary party leader Ahmed Dogan for donations to the victims of the earthquake in Turkey, then taken up centrally by the entire movement, is another step towards strengthening this priority. Regional stability in a confrontation between Russia and the West without Ankara would be difficult to achieve. From such a point of view, it is not unimportant for the Western powers who are Ankara's preferred partners in Bulgaria.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). The party clearly intend to construct their entire campaign around the referendum they launched against joining the eurozone. The referendum petition creates, firstly, the feeling of constant upward movement, because the updated number of signatures is reported every day, and secondly, the feeling of an overlap between the number of signatories and the number of "Vazrazhdane" voters. The first is a logical PR tactic, the second is illusory, but together they fuel the party's ambition to rearrange the agenda of Bulgarian politics. Even the refusal of the Bulgarian authorities regarding the date of January 1st, 2024 was presented as the first success of the initiative, after which many more will come.

Their claim to be the leading political power is almost certainly unrealistic. In such a way, however, those voters who like the ideas of "Vazrazhdane" but fear that the reluctance for coalitions and compromises will doom the party to eternal opposition. The leader Kostadin Kostadinov has consistently shifted Bulgarian nationalism towards populism. Most themes of the "old" nationalist parties remain peripheral. Kostadinov, for example, was forced to take a stand on the disputes with North Macedonia, without, however, going into them in depth. His focus is the negation of the elites, who supposedly hinder Bulgarian development. In this regard, however, this also applies to the competition of Slavi Trifonov, whose project for a referendum on a presidential republic falls into the same trend.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The party held a session of its 50th congress, described by many as scandalous. The leadership managed to reject all attempts to include in the agenda of the congress a request for the removal of the leader Korneliya Ninova. Some of the decisions were taken when there were suspicions of serious manipulations. 14 of the party members, most of them representatives of the Youth Union, as well as the MEP Petar Vitanov, were expelled from the congress itself with accusations of "hooligan-like"

behavior. Subsequently, a process of leaving the party began, which included leading representatives of several local structures, including those from Pernik and Plovdiv, and Stanislav Vladimirov, the mayor of Pernik himself. The Congress adopted guidelines for a new party programme, which did not arouse any interest. The only more serious news from the event was Ninova's announcement that the party will initiate a national referendum against gender education in school. The ideological context of this intention is contained in Ninova's report to the congress. There, for the first time, it was clearly stated that the world is divided between global-liberal and national-conservative, and the place of the Bulgarian socialists is with the national-conservative.

Efforts by the party leadership to present all conflicts as "principled" are hardly convincing to anyone. On the contrary, the ambition for total control over the party and turning it into a convenient tool for various future coalition combinations is becoming increasingly clear. Ninova and her entourage can hardly be hoping for significant electoral improvement. The list of roster leaders, made up mostly of figures who have already proven their inability to stop the downward movement, is indicative. Perhaps the only exception is the nomination of the popular left-wing activist Boris Tsvetkov in Pernik, but there, due to the specific circumstances, the chances of a turnaround are the lowest possible. How can Ninova's strategy be interpreted? In all likelihood, there is an expectation that the outflow of socialists who disagree with her leadership will be compensated by the return of the paper ballot, activism around the gender referendum and mobilisation against the new "Bulgarian Left" formation. All three factors have rather dubious weight. BSP stand distinctly on positions that are retrograde-conservative and Eurosceptical. If these positions were to be able to generate new voters, they would more likely be voters of parties like "Vazrazhdane". Nino-

va's appeal to the socialists to participate in the petition of "Vazrazhdane" for the referendum against the euro, apart from a unique decision of its kind to be included in the election campaign of another party, is also a clear sign of where BSP see their place - in the niche of "Vazrazhdane" and populist nationalism. Just that this niche is already occupied by "Vazrazhdane" themselves.

An additional problem in the BSP case, however, arises from the lack of an alternative. "Bulgarian Left" have their own faces and figures, they have media influence and political experience, but in many senses they are close to the current socialist party in their conservative attitudes. If "Bulgarian Left" have any longer-term chances, they will come from attracting young people and withdrawing the authoritative initiators. So far, however, history has shown that it is precisely these initiators who are least inclined to actually, rather than fictitiously, take steps backwards.

BSP have competition in the left space, but it is not certain that there is an alternative. With her actions at the congress and after it, Korneliya Ninova has clearly shown that she has no intention of making any changes to her line, which invariably and unequivocally deepens the decline.

"Bulgarian Rise" ("Bulgarski Vuzhod" - BV). The party perspective cannot be determined. In practice, the departure of former activists, some of whom (for example Lilia Nedeva) sharply accuse the leader Stefan Yanev of authoritarianism and obsession with personal ratings. Negotiations for a pre-election coalition with VMRO - Bulgarian National Movement - ended in failure. The conviction of irresolution and ambiguity in positions is widespread. If Yanev were to rely only on political behaviour, he would hardly be able to enter the new parliament. It is possible, of course, that he might be relying on something else.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgaria's foreign policy in the conditions of severe geopolitical confrontation is consistent with the country's membership in the EU and NATO. The nuance that President Rumen Radev introduced long ago has to do with scepticism regarding military aid to Ukraine. In recent weeks, however, the attitude of Western powers towards Ukraine has increasingly been subordinated precisely to the imperative of providing military aid. This risks turning Bulgarian difference into Bulgarian "dissidence". The development of hostilities has yet to bring about changes in the previous positions of Europe and America, but the point of view of Sofia is likely to meet with less and less understanding.

Dominant party assessments of foreign policy in Bulgaria are firmly Euro-Atlantic. Even parties declared to be "Russophile", such as "Vazrazhdane" or BSP, have never taken an open pro-Russian position in the conflict, nor have they demanded an end to Western military aid to Ukraine altogether. Despite everything, however, a significant part of the media is increasingly actively advocating opinions sceptical of the West. The fact that some of these media are close to the so-called Euro-Atlantic parties, shows that facade Euro-Atlanticism must be accepted with certain reservations. A negative role for Euro-Atlanticism in the coming weeks will be played by the increasingly circulated claims that a possible regular Bulgarian government after the elections will be imposed from abroad.

Bulgaria is entering yet another election campaign, in which there are too few inspiring factors. There are practically no new parties. Those that come on the scene as new ones are actually coalition formats with already existing parties. This increases the risk of reproducing the low voter turnout and party struggle not for the entire electorate, but for that small part

of it that voted previously. It is true that this time there is intrigue as to who the winners of the elections will be. But even whatever party this turns out to be would hardly motivate the non-voters in the complete absence of clarity whether the winners could assemble a parliamentary majority. In other words, if there is a winner after the elections, this will be whoever manages to form a government. The task is also made more difficult because the parties involved in this government will have to face the inevitable upheavals in the party system that occur after each local vote. And the local elections are just a few months away. The role of the presidential institution in the post-election situation should not be underestimated. Radev's decision as to whether to reproduce his previous distance, combined with criticism of the inability of the parties to get along with each other, or whether he will try to be more active will gain significance. Whether the negotiations for a regular cabinet succeed or fail, the image of the President as (still) the only factor of stability in the political system will depend on the outcome.

It is too early to predict campaign highlights, but two have already stood out. One is another "status quo-change" battle, which is now more complicated than ever, because there is no consensus on who belongs to "status quo" and who belongs to "change." And the second is a geopolitical interpretation of almost all topics on the agenda of Bulgarian politics. This seems to shift the focus away from the social and economic problems of Bulgarian citizens. The BSP crisis undoubtedly contributes to this trend, whatever piecemeal measures the party proposes. There is a risk that the already heated "war for left-wing succession" will overshadow the competition for left-wing policies. It is becoming clear that a convincing left-wing party is a condition that is hard to avoid for the stabilisation of the Bulgarian political process.

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FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where

the quality and neutrality of Bulgarian media is under question, we aim to provide a scientific basis for a political discussion for Bulgarian and international readers.
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