

SPECTRUM HUNGAROLOGICUM

Cultic Revelations:

Studies in Modern Historical
Cult Personalities and Phenomena

Edited by Anssi Halmesvirta

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**Cultic Revelations: Studies in Modern Historical
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Edit Rózsavölgyi

**CHANGES IN THE HUNGARIAN POLITICAL
SYSTEM FROM 1988 TO 1990¹**

In this essay we intend to view the most important political and economic events of 1988-90, which played a crucial role in the change of regime in Hungary and outline them as if they were seen through several cameras at the same time. One of the lenses is that of the analyzing theoretician. The other one is that of an S-VHS camera held by the *Black Box*, the first Hungarian video magazine, the collaborators of which undertook the factual documentation of the events throughout these years. The third is one man's subjective camera, the reminiscences of László Pesty², a witness of history, who often risked serious danger to record the events of these years.

¹ Ed. note: This article does not directly deal with cults but it demonstrates the change of the system from a 'politics of the eye' perspective which defies cultic practices.

² Dr. László Pesty was born in Budapest, on 11 September 1964. He graduated from the University ELTE of Budapest, Faculty of Law and from ELTE, Media Faculty. He was a founder and collaborator of the *Black Box* in 1988-1990, a founding member of the *Pesty Black Box* in 1990. He has been a TV reporter and producer since 1998 and reporter of the *Pesty Black Box* television program since 1999. As a war correspondent and reporter he went to Cuba with the resistance movement, he visited the Russian prisons, witnessed the war in Groznyj, in Chechnia and in Kharabach during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war. He also went to the Balkans during the wars: in Osiek, in Sarajevo and Montenegro. He recorded the revolutionary changes in Czechoslovakia, in the GDR, Poland, in the Baltic States, in Moscow and in Romania. He produced several documentaries on different topics of social problems in various countries all over the world.

Illegal, banned press existed in Hungary from the early 1980s. It was called '*samizdat*' originating from the Russian expression '*sam iz daty*', in other words, the system in the USSR by which government-suppressed literature was clandestinely printed and distributed. The police chased and confiscated these publications which were printed in cellars and attics in limited editions and distributed among intellectuals.

In the spring of 1988 six intellectuals, all previously involved in the resistance movement, decided to establish the audiovisual *samizdat*. They were film directors András Lányi and Judit Ember, photographer István Jávör, producer Márta Elbert, sociologist Gábor Vági and cameraman László Pesty. They set up the *Black Box* video magazine. 'Video' because it was neither television nor film, as they did not broadcast or screen movies; 'magazine' because it came out as a periodical, with several copies issued. They recorded events, interviews, street demonstrations clandestinely, and then edited the material, making one and a half hour long documentary programmes. They produced from two to three hundred VHS copies and distributed them.

The Central European one party dictatorship during the 1970s and 1980s meant the following: no free elections, voting for one single person of one single party. One single ideology was hammered in at schools and universities. Bookshops and TV stations reflected the same ideology. It was not possible to travel freely from one country to another, nor to express one's opinions freely. The individuals who believed in and spoke out alternative ideas were punished with sanctions. These sanctions were very rigorous in Soviet Union and in Romania compared to Hungary but the system was basically identical. Orwell's book, *1984* was not published in these countries as their leaders knew that the readers would have recognized themselves between the lines. Pesty says³:

"In spring 1988, when we started to work [as the group of the Black Box], we did not see that the system might collapse. We could not hope this then. We

³ The deep interview with László Pesty some parts of which were incorporated into the text was made between the summer of 2000 and June 2001.

wanted to shoot long documentaries, analytical works about the existing situation. We had to accept the frame of an embarrassing clandestine activity having no idea for how long. We did not know that within a few months' time demonstrations would take place on the streets of Budapest and parties would be founded. Events speeded up two months after our establishing date. Thus we started to make action news as nobody else was recording the events of the change."

The year 1987 brought serious changes in Hungarian political and economic life. After 40 years establishing private economic enterprises was permitted for the first time. Tax legislation was introduced. One of the most astonishing economic demonstrations of Hungarian society in favor of the market economy and consumerism took place when thousands of people queued up in the stores of Vienna to buy different consumer goods, mostly technical. This shopping craze meant a significant flowing out of capital from the country. At the same time inflation and unemployment reached considerable proportions in Hungary. Among the events that forced the changes the following should be mentioned: economic crisis (inflation, unemployment), the strengthening of the reform wing of the State Party and *perestroika*.

In May 1988 the State Party was preparing for its congress. Shakiness and suspense preceded the event. As a result, important personal changes among the membership of the Central and Political Committee were effected. New watchwords appeared: "turn, reform, swerve". The world press welcomed the events with headlines like: "Hungarian perestroika", "Reformers Win", "A turn in Budapest". The May congress, however, made its most important impact on social self-organization. Several small opposition groups already existed, but in the spring and summer of 1988 the widespread social conflict exploded, mainly among the younger generation and the intellectuals. People, whenever they could, on the occasion of an anniversary, for example, went out on the streets and spoke out their opinions. The reaction to these demonstrations was still that of coshes and arrests. People were mobilized and kept together mostly by the following issues: the question of the building the Gabčíkovo dam, the situation of the

Hungarian minorities in Transylvania (Romania) and the judgment on the events of 1956.

Pesty and his colleagues recorded each important event and demonstration. Pesty recalls the demonstration of 16th June, 1988:

"This day is the anniversary of the execution of Imre Nagy, prime minister of the government in charge during the anti-Soviet revolution in 1956. The opposition was gathering in the City Center, at the Batthányi sanctuary lamp, which is an important memorial place. Liveried or plain-clothes policemen were awaiting all around, nobody knew what would exactly happen. Gáspár Miklós Tamás philosopher marked out from the masses of the people and started to speak. The policemen were approaching him. In that very moment a short-haired, bearded young man, another leader of the opposition tightly clasped Gáspár Miklós Tamás' arm because two interlocked men can be dragged away with much more difficulty than single one.

Tear gas, cosh, police attack and arrests.

Police naturally did not like us shooting, I often managed to record the events only hanging the camera down or holding it under my armpit. The police wanted to confiscate the camera and the recorded tape but I did not give it to them and tried to run away. While I was running they hit me with the cosh in a way that I almost lost my eyesight."

1988 witnessed three police attacks against peaceful demonstrators: first on 16th June then on 23rd October, anniversary of the 1956 revolution, and finally on 15th November, when the Hungarian opposition organized a demonstration against Ceausescu as a proclamation of their solidarity with the Romanian opposition movement.

The Hungarian opposition saw that the *Black Box* people were always present and they were the only ones to record the events. So they became the media of the opposition. The state owned television did not show up at these historical events because they were forbidden to do so.

The functioning of the *Black Box* was basically ensured by two things: the financial support of the Soros Foundation, and the fact that the Béla Balázs Studio, the only independent film studio existing at the time, housed them, assuring a berth and an infrastructure for their activity. Pesty recalls:

"The members of the opposition regularly informed us about what was going to happen in Budapest and in the country. From the very beginning we went out for shooting almost everywhere, to flats, to the street, to cultural houses, anywhere where something happened and we knew that the official media would not be present. If an atrocity happened on the streets of Budapest we rushed many times to the place to document it."

As the reform objectives of the 1988 party conference got stuck at the level of rhetoric and as such at the level of a half turn, the tensions and unsolved problems led to the collapse of the MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party). It took from the end of January until the middle of February 1989 for the party crisis to explode, becoming obvious to the public as well. It ended with the Central Committee meeting on 10-11th February. The fight was primarily for the acceptance of the multiparty system and the declaration of 1956 as a popular uprising, which was urged on by the announcement of Imre Pozsgay⁴ at the end of January and was unambiguously refused by Károly Grósz⁵ response.

After heated debates, finally both the Central Committee and the Political Committee voted for the multiparty system and for the re-evaluation of 1956. Events speeded up, decisions made in response to pressure from the opposition initially led to the re-evaluation of several topics (for example, the impact of Imre Nagy's personality and activities) and finally to that of the whole of Hungarian history. By that time, substantial international attention and solidarity accompanied the Hungarian changes.

At first, the conservative wing of the state party believed that contacting the opposition parties one by one might lead to the

⁴ Imre Pozsgay was a key player in Hungary's transition to a western style democracy, in the fall of communism or as Hungarians call it "the change of the system" (*rendszer váltás*). With Kádár's removal in 1988 Pozsgay was promoted to Minister of State, a position equal in rank to that of Deputy Prime Minister.

⁵ Károly Grósz was Chairman of the Council of Ministers until October 7, 1989 when he was succeeded by Miklós Németh. In May 1988 Grósz was elected General Secretary of the MSZMP at Kádár's recommendation. He aimed at accomplishing a moderate and careful reform of socialism without touching its foundations.

division of the opposition. However, in March 1989, the Opposition Roundtable (OR) was formed and acted as the unified representative of the opposition, upsetting the expectations of the conservatives. The OR began bilateral negotiations and rejected all the bills which did not concern the setting up of a freely elected parliament, but were aimed at debating the current social affairs. During the negotiations, lasting for two months, the opposition managed to strengthen the demand that the country was in need of a legally and freely elected parliament which should be the one and only legitimate power in Hungary. In the course of the negotiations, the reform-communist wing of the state party gradually strengthened its position. Although the pro-Grósz line temporarily slowed the negotiations down, by the end of October it was once and for all disarmed. Through informal channels, the reform wing and the opposition increasingly and firmly isolated the conservative wing of the state party. This was also enhanced by the fact that in the course of the summer, on the occasion of Imre Nagy's reburial, 1956 gained an important role in public thinking and in the judgment of the political morals. The mood of compromise infused with transformation of history politics is depicted thus:

"First in February, when the re-evaluation of the revolution, previously just referred to as the events of 1956, took place, Imre Pozsgay proposed a compromise for the party apparatus. In the long run the message was rather simple: if the definition is counterrevolution, then there is no one to negotiate with and there is nothing to negotiate about. In this case "we" would sit down to come to an agreement with the descendants of the "counterrevolutionaries" spitting into our own eyes. If the definition is revolution, then again there is no one to negotiate with and there is nothing to negotiate about. In this case "we" served a counterrevolutionary regime for 35 years and will not be entitled to play any kind of role in a democratic regime. Therefore let us choose the middle road: let it be popular uprising. This at least allows for some kind of post-historical corrections, and more importantly, allows for a compromise. It was not "we" who defeated the uprising but "they" who did it, "we" did not impose this system on society but "they" did. "We" tried to take advantage of our power within the framework provided by "them" and now that we have the opportunity "we" return this power to the people. On the occasion of Imre Nagy's reburial, by May, it became clear that the burial, which had turned into a national issue,

would define the category of “us” and “them” for the first time in a long time. The burial was the burial of state socialism at the same time.” (László Bruszt 1990, p. 166.)

In the end, the negotiations began six days before the burial. Hence the borderline between “us” and “them” was not defined. But it seems that Hungarian society, and within it especially the intellectuals, were especially susceptible to such definitions. Until today, the intellectual, cultural, and even the scientific strata are strikingly politicized in Hungary. The intellectual circles continuously register and signal their political affiliation. Obviously, an important psychological reason for this is that the intellectuals undertook an extraordinarily important role in the Hungarian transformations. Only Pesty’s group was allowed to participate in the negotiations of the Opposition Roundtable. As László Pesty recalls:

“At the Opposition Roundtable the negotiations took place exclusively among the already existing opposition parties and the media was excluded. Only we could record them. The parties of the OR had to exclude the public in order to be able to negotiate in peace as the whole mechanism of the party state, including the media, the public administration, the police and the political nomenclature was against them. At least for these few hours they wanted to be alone and to talk in peace. We handed over the recorded material to the leader of the OR day after day, although after a few weeks trust had grown so strong that they did not expect us to do so any longer and the cassettes could stay with us. We hid them and the participating parties gave their consent to the release of the 165 hours long locked-up material only in 2000.”

By 1989 danger ceased to exist in Hungary, the police did not react violently to the street demonstrations any more, the party state slowly retreated, and the negotiating table overtook the role of the street. Street demonstrations were still going on and people were still frightened of reprisals but they were not subject to them any more.

At this time almost everything remained unchanged in the neighboring countries where the first demonstrations had begun and police terror was booming. The Hungarian opposition continued to take care of its contacts and expressed its solidarity

with the opposition groups of the neighboring countries. We should not forget that as a consequence of the Trianon Treaty after World War I many Hungarians reside in the neighboring countries as a substantial minority. Moreover, if changes were to take place in only one of the socialist countries, Hungary would be more likely to remain isolated in the course of democratic changes and reorganization could occur.

Therefore, in August 1989 a part of the Hungarian opposition decided to go to Prague. On behalf of the Hungarian nation they wanted to apologize to the Czechs for what had happened on August 21, 1968 when Hungarian tanks and soldiers crossed the Czechoslovakian border in order to participate in the Soviet invasion aimed at defeating the 'Prague spring', that is the 1968 revolution in Prague. The outcome of the event brought about an extraordinary reaction in the world media and was an extremely important chapter in the life of the *Black Box* as well:

"Already at the border the Czech secret police removed a substantial part of the Hungarian opposition from the train, I was among them. I claimed that I was not part of the Hungarian opposition movement any more, I was not an activist of the opposition, I just documented the events from outside, objectively. We were locked by the Czech authorities for one night, and then they made us return to Budapest. Fortunately we still had time. I designed a special plan to cross the border. In the end I walked to Czechoslovakia. In the morning of the demonstration we gathered at our hiding place in Prague where the opposition politicians, my friends, painted a huge transparent which said: "Now we've come with flowers, not with tanks." At noon the action began on Vencel square. They were demonstrating, making speeches, I was recording. The police devastated the Vencel square with unprecedented force and brutality. I was arrested first. I threw my camera with the precious recording in it over the head of the policemen. My assistant caught it and ran into the masses with it. The recording of me being dragged away was not only showed in the news of the free countries of the world but also in the news of the Hungarian State TV. It was the first time that the Hungarian public opinion heard that a video company called *Black Box* existed. We, arrested Hungarians, spent days in prison while in Budapest there were demonstrations in front of the Czechoslovakian embassy in order to demand our release."

The events followed each other at an increasing speed. At the same time as the exclusive negotiations of the OR went on, conciliatory meetings took place at the National Roundtable, where the groups of the state party, the opposition and civic organizations were represented. Both the Hungarian and the western media published information about the events.

As the parliament accepted the law on assembly at the beginning of 1989, the legal framework for the multiparty system was provided. However, the *de facto* multiparty system preceded the *de iure* stage which began only at the beginning of November when the party law came into effect. The formation of parties, the articulation of the different political interests were decisive in determining the dynamics of all political actors and political spheres. In 1989 the one-party-system ceased to exist, the state party disintegrated and was replaced by the MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) which was integrated into the multiparty system.

Social scientists divide the genealogy of appearance of the parties, into three phases:

1. The first generation of parties included the MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum), SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats) and FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats). These parties were formed first, gathering the leaders of the opposition around them and they were formed by the opposition itself. Their aim was to criticize the state party and to counter the autocracy of the MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party).

2. The main characteristics of the second generation, the so-called historical or "nostalgia" parties were that they had lesser known leaders and they had to fight serious battles among their members, who belonged to the different generations (e.g. Hungarian Social-Democratic Party, Smallholder's Party, Christian-Democratic Popular Party).

3. The third generation was represented by the new-born small parties, which were formed as opposition to the opposition, and were usually issue-focused (e.g. Green Party, Health Party) or advocates of extremist trends (e.g. October Party, Radical Party, etc.).

The fact that by the end of 1989 almost 50 registered parties were operating in Hungary, reflected the favorable atmosphere for party formation and the desire for the expression of free thought.

Although the MSZMP announced the introduction of a multiparty system only in the spring of 1989, the Independent Smallholder's Party and the Hungarian Social-Democratic Party had already existed since January, 1989. Several other organizations had already had the means to turn into a party at short notice. At first, the FIDESZ, for example, recruited members through secret and/or informal ways among young people. Only the ones who were the most active and the most outspoken were able to appear regularly in public.

In addition to the appearance of the new parties, various civil initiatives such as the associations with political orientations, those referred to as alternative movements, those established for specific purposes, federations like alternative trade unions, youth and cultural organizations and societies also played an important role in the events. They did not aim at solving political and/or economic questions on a global level, with a program, nor at gaining power, but simply undertook the representation of the interests of different social groups. The scale of values transmitted by the parties made their appearance within these movements as well. Youth movements also acted as mediators of these values.

The so called alternative movements proclaimed the values of humanity, benevolence and solidarity, for example, the environmental protection movements (e.g. Danube Circle), the peace movements, human rights movements or those representing the rights of the Hungarian minorities in the neighboring countries, organizations of political prisoners, of prisoners of war, of minority groups. Cultural associations and corporations were established with similar principles.

Different professions established associations very swiftly. In Budapest the setting up of the OR was linked up with the name of the Independent Forum of Lawyers, while the so called Public Opinion Club organized regular discussions and debates raising political questions or problems related to public life. The

establishment of the *Black Box Independent Video Magazine* was opposed to the official electronic media, the only television.

Several trade unions were formed. Demand for disabled people's rights occurred for the first time in many decades. One of the most famous organizations SZETA (Fund in Aid of the Poor) was well ahead of the change of the regime, always bearing the risk of persecution, as notions like unemployment, poverty and any kind of deviation had officially been unknown in Hungary for 40 years. Everyone „lived in equality and happily ever after“. The foundation of new legal entities and a strong desire to establish new political parties were the main phenomena that accompanied the peaceful political changes of this era.

A more and more visible differentiation of the political and intellectual alignments took shape, alongside the polarization of the State Party. Right from the start, the parties which had their roots in the opposition life and fed on the soil of the 1980s detached themselves from the circle of parties with a great past but with a smaller base rooted in the present.

The formation of the OR played a crucial role for the opposition parties in gaining social reputation as well as getting to know and to accept one another better. The OR founding organizations were the following: FIDESZ, Christian-Democratic Popular Party, MDF, Hungarian Popular Party, Hungarian Social-Democratic Party, SZDSZ. The OR meetings, the tripartite then bilateral conciliatory meetings lined up the elite and the expert advisory panel of the parties. Signs of the cooperative ability and intentions of the parties were given and the opportunity was created for the parties and their leaders to make a name for themselves also ensuring the possibility of public appearance.

Before sitting at the table, the opposition parties were also active on the streets. They organized demonstrations, took an active role on the occasion of Imre Nagy's reburial, organized solidarity and charity actions and campaigns in the neighboring countries. The FIDESZ, MDF and SZDSZ acted the most efficiently in these fields.

While Hungary was preparing for the first free elections in the spring of 1990, the State Party trampled down the institution of

democracy. The outburst of the so-called "Duna-gate case" is connected with the name of the *Black Box*. Pesty recalls:

"I returned back from Romania in January 1990. We were only within a few months from the first free elections. The MSZMP made a promise that no secret police means or police measures would disturb the preparations of the opposition for the elections. The communists assured not to bug the opposition leaders during the campaign. One of the majors of the secret police showed up at the Black Box in January. He ran the risk to take us into a secret filing-cabinet where the still ongoing bugging reports were kept. We penetrated into the building under circumstances of a crime story and recorded the secret documents with our camera. We hid our collaborator for several months so that his colleagues could not take their revenge on him. The lie of the state party was revealed, the leaders of the opposition were bugged and scouted continuously. As a result of the scandal István Horváth, the last communist internal affairs' minister had no other choice but to resign two months before the first free elections. It was perhaps the biggest internal affairs' scandal of the decade, the so called 'Duna-gate case'."

Seemingly, the government tried to express its democratic intentions by voting a total of 100 million Forints' support to the parties before the elections, taking into account the number of their members. The parties who received the largest amount, 15 million Forints, were MDF (with 22,000 members), FKGP (with 23,000 members) and the Hungarian Social-Democratic Party (with 10,000 members); the smallest amount, assigned to the Hungarian Liberal Popular Party (with 1,600 members), was 2 million Forints. SZDSZ numbered 8,600, FIDESZ 3,500 members at that time. Party dues ranged from 10 to 150 Forints.

Some parties possessed their own publications. These were the following (data quoted from István Stumpf's article, 1990, pp. 389-390.):

MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party): *Népszabadság* (daily), *Újforum* (fortnightly), *Társadalmi Szemle* (monthly) and a regional newspaper.

MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum): *Magyar Fórum*, *Hitel* (both fortnightly).

SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats): *Beszélő* (weekly), *SZDSZ-bulletin*.

FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats): *Magyar Narancs*, *FIDESZ Press*.

FKGP (Independent Smallholder's Party): *Kis Újság* (fortnightly).

Magyar Néppárt (Hungarian Popular Party): *Szabad Szó* (fortnightly).

MSZDP (Hungarian Social-Democratic Party): *Szociáldemokrata Népszava* (fortnightly).

MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party): *Szabadság* (fortnightly).

MSZP, the "new" MSZMP and the parties of the Opposition Roundtable (SZDSZ, MDF, FIDESZ and the so-called historical parties: MSZDP, FKGP, Hungarian Popular Party, Hungarian Christian-Democratic Popular Party) proclaimed their political programs. The large parties organized their congresses in the second half of the year, and these were covered by Hungarian Television news. Initiatives resulting in social movements increased the popularity of certain parties. In the case of FIDESZ, this happened with Viktor Orbán's speech at the reburial of Imre Nagy. The SZDSZ increased its popularity when campaigning for signatures for the plebiscitary initiation to elect the president of the republic, while those who opposed it, MDF and MSZP, leading the polls in close contest, lost some of their popularity in this campaign. The index of popularity took shape according to the data of the public opinion polls.

The parties seemed to be grouped around three main political streams:

1. a popular-national and Christian (its main parties were: MDF, FKGP, MKDNP),
2. a social-liberal (SZDSZ, FIDESZ),
3. a socialist, social-democratic (MSZP, MSZDP).

Disagreement among the opposition parties, beyond their proclaimed political and economic programs, became more and more obvious. Confrontation soon took place, on the occasion of campaigning for signature for the plebiscitary initiative or of the

formation of the Hungarian Television and Radio multiparty Board of Supervision.

The first free elections were over in the spring of 1990. The Hungarian Democratic Forum gained the credit for setting up the government. The first free local government elections were held in the autumn of the same year. László Pesty says:

„We believed that freedom would come from one day or another and market economy just be born. The pressure disappeared and the *Black Box* lost its strength in a second. There was no more cohesion among us; contradictions came to the fore. I wanted to establish a capitalist company on a market basis because there was market economy after all. Two older colleagues of mine were for the non-profit profile and for the foundation form. We had no political disagreement but we had different views concerning our economic operation and therefore we split into two. Under my leadership the *Pesty Black Box* was formed and the other half of the group continued its activities under the name of 'Black Box Foundation'. As the director of the *Pesty Black Box* I still considered the documentation of the continuously changing Hungary important. At the beginning of the 90s, while the old communists started to disappear, a new epidemic emerged: the extreme right. The number of skinhead and other right wing groups was increasing. We began documenting their activities. We started to make a social-documentary movie about the fall of the living standards and about the increasing unemployment. This kind of orientation and the highlighting of social problems characterize our work even today...

1990 is considered to be the year of the change of the system. I do not subscribe to this. People carried through the change of the system in the demonstrations of 1988 and the politicians of the opposition did the same at the negotiating table in 1989...

I have spoken about the most exciting period of my life. We were young, enthusiastic and in love. We were in love with the revolution because according to our Central-European standards this was a revolution. People were not hanged on the iron stalls of lamps on the streets, there was no shooting, we managed to change a political system without fight demanding the lives of people and we managed to sweep away the dictatorship. It was a beautiful period or rather it was so simple. Only two kind of people existed: one which defended the dictatorship – the communism, and another which stands on our side – the democrats. Everybody marched together on the side of the democrats: the right wing, the left wing, the Christian democrats, anarchists, radicals and social democrats were all represented among us. In one word: everybody who wanted to be a democrat. At that time everybody marched under one single flag.

By today, this is all gone. These people hate each other by now; they form different camps and do not communicate with one another.

This was a moment which cannot be repeated.

This was my youth.

What is left from the revolutionary spirit for today is the inner compulsion that under any circumstances we have to bring any event to light when human freedom is violated.

I am interested in one thing only - freedom."

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