

## **IMPACT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEDIA OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA**

The author analyzes the present day media of the Republic of Bulgaria and studies the changes they underwent during the period of preparation for accession and its membership in the European Union. The author expresses the important role that the media played in the European integration process, reflecting its impact on social and political life of the state. The democratization of the society has contributed to a significant transformation of the media system and methods of its management. Bulgaria was able to synchronize its media legislation with European norms and standards, which led to a positive dynamics in the development of the media market, TV and radio broadcasting in particular. Bulgaria's EU integration led to positive transformation of the media policy and media legislation improvement. The European integration process is currently the main priority of Bulgaria's foreign policy. The EU membership gave Bulgaria the opportunities to develop democratic institutions, including the media system, which in turn allowed Bulgaria to achieve greater internal stability. The Republic of Bulgaria has not yet reached the standards of the European information policy in the field of ethnic issues, but after joining the EU there are tangible positive changes in the improvement of this sphere.

*Keywords: Republic of Bulgaria, mass media, European integration, media policy and mass media law*

## **WPŁYW INTEGRACJI EUROPEJSKIEJ NA TRANSFORMACJĘ MEDIÓW REPUBLIKI BUŁGARII**

Autorka poddaje analizie współczesne media Republiki Bułgarii i bada zmiany, jakie zaszły w okresie przygotowań do akcesji i członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej. Autorka zwraca uwagę na ważną rolę, jaką media odegrały w procesie integracji europejskiej, odzwierciedlając ich wpływ na życie społeczne i polityczne państwa. Demokryzacja społeczeństwa przyczyniła się do istotnej transformacji systemu medialnego i metod zarządzania nim. Bułgarii udało się zsynchronizować swoje ustawodawstwo dotyczące mediów z normami i standardami europejskimi, co doprowadziło do pozytywnej dynamiki rozwoju rynku mediów, w szczególności telewizji i radia. Integracja Bułgarii z UE doprowadziła do pozytywnej transformacji polityki medialnej i poprawy ustawodawstwa medialnego. Proces integracji europejskiej jest obecnie głównym priorytetem polityki zagranicznej Bułgarii. Członkostwo w Unii Europejskiej dało Bułgarii możliwości rozwoju instytucji demokratycznych, w tym systemu medialnego, co z kolei pozwoliło

temu krajowi osiągnąć większą stabilność wewnętrzną. Republika Bułgarii nie osiągnęła jeszcze standardów europejskiej polityki informacyjnej w zakresie problematyki etnicznej, ale po wejściu do UE następują wymierne pozytywne zmiany w tej sferze.

*Słowa kluczowe: Republika Bułgarii, środki masowego przekazu, integracja europejska, polityka medialna i prawo dotyczące środków masowego przekazu*

## **ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ МЕДІА РЕСПУБЛІКИ БОЛГАРІЯ ПІД ВПЛИВОМ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОЇ ІНТЕГРАЦІЇ**

У статті проаналізовано сучасний стан засобів масової інформації в Республіці Болгарія та зміни, що відбулись у цій галузі за період її підготовки членства в Європейському Союзі. Автор підкреслює, що засоби масової інформації відігравали ключову роль у процесі європейської інтеграції, відображаючи всі соціальні процеси, особливо вплив європейської інтеграції на соціальне та політичне життя країни. Демократизація суспільства сприяла значній трансформації системи ЗМІ та її методів управління. Країна зуміла синхронізувати своє законодавство про ЗМІ з європейськими нормами та стандартами, що створило позитивну динаміку у розвитку медіа-ринку, особливо у сегменті телебачення та радіомовлення. Інтеграція Болгарії до Європейського Союзу дала позитивний поштовх до трансформації медіа-політики та вдосконалення законодавства щодо ЗМІ. Процес європейської інтеграції на сьогодні є основним пріоритетом зовнішньої політики Болгарії. Приєднання до ЄС надало Болгарії нові можливості для розвитку демократичних інститутів, включаючи систему ЗМІ, що у свою чергу дозволило Болгарії досягти більшої внутрішньої стабільності. РБ поки ще не досягла стандартів європейської інформаційної політики у сфері етнічних питань, але після вступу до ЄС є відчутні позитивні зрушення в розвитку цієї сфери.

*Ключові слова: Республіка Болгарія, засоби масової інформації, європейська інтеграція, медіа-політика та законодавство про ЗМІ*

Integration processes play a big role in the policies of national states, especially in the modern conditions of increasing globalization and the development of the information society. As such, we can consider the Republic of Bulgaria's (RB) accession to the European Union as entering a common information space, with the primary principles to be that of democratization. However, with the development of globalization, individual countries, including the RB, faced the issue of preserving their cultural and national identity. The integration process, on the other hand, holds all the benefits of globalization but does not suppress the identity of the nation states. To contrast the destructive consequences of globalization, the EU introduced an

idea of conscious European identity, which forms new national and ethical guidelines and acts as an integration force of society.

Bulgaria has always considered itself to be a part of European civilization culturally and historically, and with the beginning of the democratic changes of 1990s – actively looked for its place in the European space. Gradually, the process of European integration became the main priority of its foreign policy activities. Therefore, the EU membership is a vital step to democracy in the Bulgarian state, because the society believes it to be a warranty of stability, international peace and protection of human rights. These tendencies are very important to the RB as a part of the unstable Balkan region.

The EU accession has become a means for achieving national strategic goals. First of all, it indicates a positive dynamics of the development of the RB as an independent democratic state that takes its rightful place in the European politics. Second, it leads to economic growth and, as a result, will improve the standard of living of Bulgarian people. EU membership has opened up new economic prospects for Bulgaria, thanks to access to European markets and new technologies, and EU structural funds created substantial prerequisites for stimulating the Bulgarian economy. All this has allowed Bulgaria to achieve greater internal stability and provided opportunities for the development of democratic institutions, including the media.

The media play a key role in the process of European integration as they reflect all social processes and influence the social and political life of the country. The democratization of Bulgarian society has led to some serious transformations of the media system and methods of its management<sup>1</sup>. We saw new media structures and their regulatory bodies emerging, while their functions and nature have changed. Gradually, Bulgaria was able to synchronize its media legislation with European norms and standards, which has created a positive dynamics of the media market development, especially in the segment of TV and radio broadcasting (the Law on Radio and TV; the Law on Radio Communication; the Law for Electronic Communications; the Law on Public Radio Broadcasting; the Law for Copyright and Related Rights; Resolution No. 1 of the 4th European Ministerial Conference on Mass Media Policy on the Future of Public Broadcasting).

Modern Bulgarian media operate based on Western experience mainly and act as commercial enterprises<sup>2</sup>. However, specific political and economic situation in the country has a negative impact on the editorial and financial independence of the media.

The media system in Bulgaria dates back several centuries and it has come a long way in terms of development and establishment. In 1989 due to some radical political changes in the society, the Bulgarian media system underwent major transformations – the very nature and functions of the media changed. The process of preparations and accession of the Republic of Bulgaria to the EU has overall had a positive impact on the media policy and media legislation

<sup>1</sup> Democratization in post-communist transition processes in the 1990s: Lights and shadows, Ed. by Anna Krasteva and Francesco Privitera, Ravenna, Longo, 2006, P. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Райчева Л., Българската радио- и телевизионна среда в търсене на своята идентичност, Българската журналистика 160 години. Минало, настояще, перспективи, София, 2006, С. 57.

of the state. Currently, one of the main priorities of the foreign policy of the RB is the process of European integration and the media play the main role in it.

We can distinctly link the stages of formation of the Bulgarian media system to its national history periods. The Bulgarian press emerges in the depths of the Ottoman Empire – and at first its main objective was to preserve the Bulgarian identity, culture, language and religion. During the Bulgarian Renaissance (1844-1877), the press played an important role in the national liberation movement and served as a means of consolidation of the people. The media truly flourished during this immensely important period of Bulgarian history – it was like an emergence of a national code, an entry into the common spiritual and cultural space<sup>3</sup>. After the proclamation of independence, they had to search for new ways of development in the new state, and disputes in the Bulgarian media environment did not contribute to the integration of society.

During the Communist regime, the Bulgarian media performed exclusively ideological functions<sup>4</sup>. However, with the beginning of the democratization processes in the Republic of Bulgaria, the social and political systems had started changing accordingly. This led to fundamental changes in the media sector as well. It was the time that commercial media appeared in the country, which dissociated themselves from the state and changed their course, looking for their audience. When the euphoria from the democratic change subsided, Bulgaria was able to identify a number of problems that required immediate solution. The media sphere was in the need of legislative reforms aimed at creating an effective system of media regulation and functioning of the media market. So in 1998, the Law “On Radio and Television” was adopted to regulate the audiovisual media sector. The law provided for the establishment of media regulatory bodies and the introduction of mandatory licensing for all electronic media market participants (The Law on Radio and TV).

The process of the preparation and the accession to the EU played an important role for the development of the Bulgarian media. During this time the Bulgarian law on mass media was synchronized with the European norms and standards (Recommendation No.R(96)10 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the Independence Safeguards of Public Media Broadcasting; Recommendation No. (2003)9 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on Measures to Promote Democratic and Social Opportunities of Digital Broadcasting; Recommendation No. 1641 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe “Public Broadcasting”)<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> ПанайотовФ., Проблеми на периодизацията на историята на българската журналистика (1844-1944), «Годишник на СУ «Св. Климент Охридски», Факултет по журналистика, София, 1979, 73 т., 1 кн., С. 173.

<sup>4</sup> ПанайотовФ., «Печата»», България XX век. София. 1999, С. 838; ДесничинаМ., Между фанфарите и закланията. Тоталитарният модел на българската журналистика 1956–1989 година, София, УИ «Св. Климент Охридски», 2008, С. 124.

<sup>5</sup> Резолюция №1 4-й Европейской конференции министров по политике в области СМИ о будущем общественного телерадиовещания, Прага, 1994, 7-8 декабря, URL: <http://www.pravoteka.ru/pst/103/51076.html> (accessed: 08.10.2019); Рекомендация №(2003)9> Комитета министров Совета Европы о мерах по развитию демократических и социальных возможностей цифрового вещания, URL: <http://docs.kodeks.ru/document/90199653> (accessed: 08.10.2019); Рекомендация №1641 (2004) Парламентской (Ассамблеи) Совета Европы «Общественное вещание», URL: <http://www.medialaw.ru/laws/otherlaws/european/rec1641-2004.htm.1> (accessed: 08.10.2019); Рекомендация №R(96)10 Комитета министров СЕ о гарантиях независимости общественных средств массового вещания, URL: <http://www.medialaw.ru/laws/otherlaws/european/r96%29.htm> (accessed: 08.10.2019).

The program policy of the Bulgarian media has changed; the legal aspects of the functioning of the media market and the provisions on media ownership have been transformed. During the EU accession preparations, the main functions and tasks of public and commercial mediagot regulated, as well as the principles of their financing and editorial policy, which, in turn, stimulated competition in the media market<sup>6</sup>.

The Bulgarian media sector is very rich in quantity. The stratification of the media market is reaching its highest – there are foreign investors and local players, tabloid formats and serious journalism, political conjuncture and independent media. Gradually, the borders between different types of media are being erased, and new media empires are emerging to offer comprehensive services. Since the EU membership has become a means to achieve national strategic goals, the media play a significant role in this process. At the same time the media industry is extremely difficult to regulate due to its dual nature. On the one hand, the media provide some type of economical service, but on the other – one should not forget about the cultural characteristics of the media. The media themselves and the product they produce are greatly responsible for shaping the culture. Thus, they are directly related to the concept of public services.

The formation of the public media sector became an important step in the Bulgarian integration process. However, the vast majority of the state's media are currently in the hands of a few entrepreneurs – and they have turned the media into a tool for achieving their political goals. The press freedom rating, compiled by the organization “Reporters without borders”, ranked Bulgaria last among all EU countries<sup>7</sup>.

The current situation in the RB shows a number of independent publications, that were pioneers back in the day, holding their leadership positions (daily newspapers “24 Hours” and “Labor”), and the heir of the Communist press (“Duma”) almost falling into decline. Weekly newspaper “Kapital” and its daily version – “Kapital Daily” are pretentious publications made for educated readers interested in politics and economics. At the beginning of the 2000s, as influence of the Internet was growing, a significant number of online portals with news content and a wide range of subscribers started to appear in Bulgaria (“News.bg” and “Dnevnik.bg”). Blogs, on the contrary, gradually lost their popularity, as most bloggers would now use social networks (e.g. Facebook) to write<sup>8</sup>.

Bulgaria TV channels that have the most influence are owned by foreigners. For example, private TV channel “bTV” belongs to the concern of Central European Media Enterprises (CME) which belongs to a billionaire from the USA, Ronald Lauder. TV channel “Nova”

<sup>6</sup> Огнянова Н., Реформа на медийното законодателство от гледна точка на процеса на присъединяване на България към ЕС, «Юридически свят», 2004, № 1, С. 141.

<sup>7</sup> България: СМИ – инструмент в руках предприемателите и бизнесмените, «Eurotopics», 2018, URL: <https://www.eurotopics.net/ru/149403%D0B2#> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

<sup>8</sup> Болгарските СМИ, URL: <http://bulgarian.name/kylytra-i-iskysstvo-bolgarii/kylytra-i-iskysstvo-bolgarii/bolgarskie-smi.html> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

was previously a part of the Swedish media concern Modern Times Group, but in 2018 it was bought by the PPF-Group owned by a Czech billionaire, P. Kellner<sup>9</sup>.

Thanks to the introduction of new entertainment formats, private national TV channels were able to quickly beat the long-term monopoly of the state TV. However, a number of social and legal TV channels such as BNT1, BNT2 and BNT HD continue to significantly influence the formation of public opinion in the country. The national radio of Bulgaria and the private radio station Darik Radio are the only nationwide radio stations, that are mostly broadcasting unique content, not music<sup>10</sup>.

Based on the new Law “On Radio and Television”, the public media should get funding from the independent fund “Radio and Television”, which collects the income from the subscription fee. The government, however, considered this measure potentially unpopular, because the subscription fee would probably feel like additional tax burden for the people living in a country with a low standard of living. Moreover, since Bulgarian public media compete with big commercial companies in the advertising market, the quality of their content is lower in comparison. Therefore, currently the media is funded from three sources: program quotas, government subsidies and advertising revenue, which inevitably raises the question of their political and financial independence.

As stated above, the concentration of media ownership and increasing investments in the media market of the RB caused a growing competition between commercial media – which led to a tendency to commercialize media content. This is when a hybrid media model is born, introducing a new form of tautological audiovisual content. In modern conditions, “classic” censorship has given way to property censorship, which has significantly limited the variety of media content and formats. Another major drawback of the media system was a weak regulatory support for the transition to digital media distribution<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, the complete transition to digital technologies and digital dissemination of information in Bulgaria was set to be finished in January, 2015, instead of the expected December, 2012. However, even now Bulgaria occupies one of the last places among the EU countries in terms of using digital technologies. The report of the European Commission (EC) “On the Progress of Digital Technologies in the Economy and Society”, indicated that Bulgaria takes the second to last place in the EU in the use of digital technologies, the Nova TV reveals. So far, the Republic of Bulgaria remains in the group of countries with “low digitalization” and only in Romania the situation with the digital technologies is worse<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Болгария: СМИ – инструмент в руках предпринимателей и бизнесменов, «Eurotopics», 2018, URL: <https://www.eurotopics.net/ru/149403%D0B2#> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

<sup>10</sup> Болгария: СМИ – инструмент в руках предпринимателей и бизнесменов, «Eurotopics», 2018, URL: <https://www.eurotopics.net/ru/149403%D0B2#> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

<sup>11</sup> Болгарские СМИ, URL: <http://bulgarian.name/kyltyra-i-iskysstvo-bolgarii/kyltyra-i-iskysstvo-bolgarii/bolgarskie-smi.html> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

<sup>12</sup> Цифровые технологии в Болгарии приживаются с трудом, 2016, URL: <http://bourgas.ru/cifrovye-tekhnologii-v-bolgarii-prizhivayutsya-s-trudom/> (accessed: 06.10.2020).



The Bulgarian media act as a communication channel that ensures the process of the European integration. As a country with a totalitarian past, Bulgaria has often demonstrated a tendency for the substitution of the social roles of the media. In modern conditions, it is only possible to form new social roles if there is a clear model of transition to a new political structure, which sets adequate rules for the interaction between the media and the government<sup>17</sup>. However, the lack of a stable democracy at the beginning of the 2010s caused the formation of pseudo-media networks. And as a result, modern Bulgarian media just broadcasts significant events, but does not get into their cause-and-effect relationships. There is no adequate understanding of the power of media in the media environment itself. Following the parliamentary elections of 2017, a new trend of mediatization of political life emerged in Bulgaria, which subsequently led to the politicization of media content. There is a belief in the media community that the media only imitate administration of their functions, and their place and role have long been replaced by the ideology of capital. Because of this, in 2018 there have been a number of serious initiatives in the field of media legislation – related to their regulation, establishment of transparency of ownership and the introduction of real restrictions on the concentration of media in the hands of one person<sup>18</sup>.

The most significant transformations in the process of European integration took place in the broadcasting sector of the Republic of Bulgaria<sup>19</sup>. In the EU, electronic media is traditionally considered a key element to the development of democracy. In the second half of the XX century we see a rapid development of the audiovisual sector in the Western Europe. It was characterized by growing globalization and commercialization of electronic media. Public and commercial broadcasters emerged and an effective system of media regulation was created. European broadcasting companies focus on the content in their information policy, which helps them to be original and thus contribute to the development of media pluralism. Public television is an important element of the European media system. It is bound to observe a number of social obligations to respect and provide for democratic principles and preserve the cultural heritage of Europe.

During the process of accession to the EU, the nature of Bulgaria's TV and radio broadcasting has changed. The main transformations were related to program policy and media regulation. A lot of new commercial companies have appeared in the electronic media market, but this has not improved the quality of their content. New broadcasters cannot cope with the competition from the large TV and radio companies – which creates the preconditions for a monopoly on the media market<sup>20</sup>. There is a need for effective regulation of the electronic media sector. There have been some improvements in this direction, like the introduction of

<sup>17</sup> Матвиенко В. В., Трансформация медийного ландшафта Болгарии в XXI веке, «Научный аспект», Серия: «гуманитарные науки», 2014, № 4, URL: <http://na-journal.ru/4-2014-gumanitarnye-nauki/494-transformacija-medijnogo-landshafta-bolgarii-v-xxi-veke> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

<sup>18</sup> Ангелов К., Телевизионната среда: Проблеми и решения, «Медии и обществени комуникации», 2018, №1, URL: <http://media-journal.info/?p=item&aid=17> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

<sup>19</sup> Bulgaria. Freedom of the Press, URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/bulgaria> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

<sup>20</sup> Табак, мафия и СМИ. Масс-медиа. Олигархи идут за покупками, С. 54-55, URL: <https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/oligarques3-ru.pdf> (accessed: 04.10.2020).



a procedure for licensing of the broadcasting companies, which introduced two types of licenses – policy license, which is issued by the Council of Electronic Media, and telecommunication license, which is issued by the Commission on Regulation of Communications<sup>21</sup>. In theory, this system was supposed to streamline the functioning of electronic media in Bulgaria, but the licensing process had been blocked for almost four years because of the disputes between regulators and the desire of the government to control the audiovisual sector.

There were some negative consequences of this situation as well – the new broadcasters were forced to conduct professional activities on the basis of temporary permits, which caused many confusion and conflicts with the established participants of the media market<sup>22</sup>. The licensing process was unblocked after the parliament approved the regulatory strategy for the development of radio and television in Bulgaria. After making changes to the Law “On Radio and Television” and the Law “On Electronic Communications”, a new regulatory framework was formed for licensing radio and television programs intended for digital distribution. In accordance to the changes, the Commission for Regulating Communications issues licenses to multiplex operators, and the Electronic Media Council licenses programs developed for digital distribution on a competitive basis. Public media receive digital broadcasting licenses automatically<sup>23</sup>.

The media legislation regulating the main functions and principles of professional activity of the media play an important role in the context of the European integration of the Republic of Bulgaria in general and in life of the Bulgarian electronic media in particular. The state has managed to successfully harmonize national legislation with the European information law. At the EU level, the electronic media regulation is implemented with the Directive “Television without Borders” and its newer restated version and the Directive “On Audiovisual Media Services”. Back in 2000, amendments to the Law “On Radio and Television” were adopted, making the legislation of the RB fully consistent with the requirements of the EU Directive “On Television without Borders”.

At the same time, Bulgarian Parliament adopted a number of official documents aimed to further develop the information society, including the “Strategy and National Program for Development of Information Society” (1999), the “E-Government Strategy” (2002), Law “On Electronic Signatures” (2001), the Law “On Personal Data Protection” (2002), etc. Currently there are three primary laws that regulate the electronic media sector in Bulgaria – the Law “On Radio and Television”, the Law “On Electronic Communications” and the Law “On Public Broadcasting”<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Захариева Ж., Лицензиране и регистрация на радио и телевизионни оператори, «Въпроси на медна регулация», София, 2016, Декември.

<sup>22</sup> Sofia à l'heure d'une petite revolution, «Le Temps» (Genève), 2013, 2 July.

<sup>23</sup> Poti O., Европа трябва активно да се противопостави на корупцията и непрозрачните преплитания в България, URL: <https://lira.bg/archives/56664?s=> (accessed: 06.10.2020).

<sup>24</sup> Закон за авторското право и сродните му права, URL: <http://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2133094401> (accessed: 07.10.2020); Закон за далекосъобщенията, URL: <http://im.cablebg.net/clients/a2zds-98.htm> (accessed: 07.10.2020); Закон за електронните съобщения, URL: <http://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2135553187> (accessed: 07.10.2020); Закон за публичното радиоразпръскване, URL: <http://contract.bg/content/view/474/48/> (accessed: 07.10.2020); Закон за радиото и телевизията, URL: <http://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2134447616> (accessed: 07.10.2020).

At its modern stage of development, the Bulgarian media refers to the Western experience and the cultural logic of postmodernism. However, said transformations in the Bulgarian media system were carried out mechanically, and the Western cultural experience was simply superimposed on top of an insufficiently developed economic basis. This has led to some mixed results. The economy of late capitalism had not yet appeared in Bulgaria, so the Western experience did not fully take roots and the Bulgarian media environment still remains quite unstable and fragmentary.

Thus, we can draw certain conclusions as a result of the conducted study. Starting with the period of preparation for the accession to the European Union, and during its 12-year membership, the media of the Republic of Bulgaria experienced positive impact of the European integration which immensely supported its transformation process. The main direction of development of the modern Bulgarian media is improving the sphere of media ownership and the dynamics of media regulation.

If we talk about potential future influence on the media environment, the withdrawal of the Bulgarian News Corporation from the market was a very important event, as well as selling the National Radio and Television Systems Directorate. The formula for combining information and entertainment content, introduced by the media conglomerates, caused a cutback in publicist broadcasts and rational analysis – until a hybrid form of program elements, such as format and content emerged. Hybrid television products have gained popularity, maintaining a steady trend towards politicization of the media content.

During the European integration, Bulgaria's media legislation has undergone serious changes. It has been synchronized with European norms and standards, which created a positive dynamic of development in the media market, especially in the TV and radio broadcasting segment. Currently a new law on broadcasting is being drafted in Bulgaria, and it is based on ensuring a balance between public and commercial media. Additionally, the Council of Electronic Media has been reformed. Its new members declared the transparency of their professional activity and that a civil control over their current work can be exercised, as well as that the regulatory process should not become a victim of political and economic interests in the conditions of active development of the media.

At the same time, we should note that the political process of the Republic of Bulgaria is rather media-mediated, but the media is not a determining factor in political life. They can influence the political agenda, but not the political processes themselves. The borders between informative and entertainment content are blurred, and the media culture is often reduced to primitive consumption of media content. Despite the fact that Bulgarian politicians and the media are closely linked, the general public is just a bystander.

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