

EBU

Annual Report

2023



The voice of blind and partially
sighted people in Europe

40
years

1984 - 2024

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A Joint Introduction from the EBU President and EBU Executive Director

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2023, a year to prepare change

Welcome to the 2023 annual report of the European Blind Union (EBU).

At the global and political level, the past year will be remembered by many of us as quite unstable and challenging. Events such as the ongoing war in Ukraine and in the Middle East, economic down-turn and high inflation and the rise of nationalist parties were just but a few characteristics of 2023. These terrible events are not just news items in media, but they have had a devastating impact on so many people's lives! As blind and partially sighted people often face additional challenges compared to sighted citizens, the role of EBU is as important as ever.

In 2023, EBU has not only provided some financial support in humanitarian crises situations such as the one in Ukraine, but our systematic work to influence decision-making and structural changes within the European Union has been strong and led to improvements in the life of visually impaired people across Europe. An example of EBU's success in advocacy is the major step towards a European disability card. Substantial progress was achieved also through our project work, where many high-quality tools at the disposal of blind and partially sighted people and their representative organisations were created. These tools have been disseminated through our various communication channels. You will read much more about all these activities and achievements in this report.

EBU also endeavours to become a more agile and responsive organisation, ready to defend the rights of blind and partially sighted people even more than previously, and this in a fast-changing and difficult environment. It is with this in mind that we embarked, in 2023, on the planning for the years to come, under a new strategy, and with a new leadership in place. To help conduct this foundational work in the run-up to our 12th General Assembly, we created the position of Membership Officer at our secretariat. Thanks to this new position, we were able to undertake a comprehensive membership survey, helping us to identify shared priorities for the years to come.

In parallel to the strategic planning, 2023 was obviously busy with all the other preparations for the General Assembly, ranging from logistics to the programme and to the various elections. Though the General Assembly will be contained in next year's annual report, we would already like to thank and to congratulate our Portuguese member, ACAPO, on a well-organised and warm General Assembly that brought together record numbers of the EBU membership to reconnect after the global pandemic!

Before letting you enjoy reading, we would like to thank all of you for your ongoing commitment and hard work for the cause of blind and partially sighted people. It is not the time nor the place to thank individuals in this introduction, but we would like to extend a warm thanks to all EBU national members who invest time and energy in the further development of EBU, the EBU Board who provides overall steer and leadership, the secretariat who navigates the waters of the daily business, and all the volunteers who devote time to EBU. Without your ongoing commitment, none of the achievements discussed in this report would have been possible! We count on all of you to continue to push our common agenda forward! And now, we let you dive in the content of the report!

Tytti Matsinen

EBU President



Tytti Matsinen photographer
Terhi Korhonen

Lars Bosselmann

EBU Executive Director



EBU Executive Director
Lars Bosselmann

The European Blind Union is a non-governmental organisation protecting and promoting the rights and interests of blind and partially-sighted people in Europe. The large number of member organisations we reunite provide us with a great deal of knowledge, expertise and experience related to visual impairment and its implications in the daily life of millions of persons with sight loss. Membership of the European Blind Union is globally stable. EBU currently has 42 members.

While the General Assembly of Members held every four years is our governing body, our work is directed by an Executive Board of up to 13 members. In 2023, the Board held meetings in Helsinki, Berlin and Ankara. In addition the officers of the Board held online meetings at regular intervals to address issues requiring urgent action. The officers' decisions were reported to and confirmed by the Board at their face to face or virtual meetings.

EBU's activities are also facilitated through Networks, established to address various work areas, including ICTs, Road safety and access to transport, rights, as well as the needs of specific segments of the visually impaired population, including persons with low vision, youth and women.

EBU also participates in campaigns and activities which have a broader scope than Europe itself, in particular as the European member of the World Blind Union, a global organisation representing the interests of 285 million blind and partially sighted people in 190 member countries worldwide.

The EBU Central Office supports the Board, national members, Commissions and Networks in their work. It is also the main contact point for information to the general public, media, members and partner organisations. Ever since it was established, the EBU Office has been located in central Paris.

Headed by the Executive Director, EBU's central office team was composed of six other staff members. In 2023 the permanent EBU staff members were:

Executive Director

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1 Summary of developments and key figures in 2023

As in previous years, the CERV programme by the European Commission (606568,05 €) as well as the membership fees paid by our national members (243945 €), constituted the main sources of income for EBU. In addition, three EC-funded projects that are now finished (PASCAL, UPOWERWAD and PARVIS) contributed 132000 € to our income in 2023. The total amount of income equals 920777 €.

As for the expenditures, they amounted to 770960 € in 2023. Main positions making up this total sum remain the salaries and related social charges for our staff (432966 €). Other running costs such as the office rental, various maintenance services, fees to buy external support services for accounting and HR support, just to give few examples, also contributed to our expenditures in 2023. Worth mentioning that a contribution of 30000 € was given to the host of our 12th General Assembly. Moreover, we continued our support to the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine with an amount of 40000 €.

2 Conclusions

As this quick overview of key figures shows, EBU had a very good financial year in 2023. Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank our national members for paying their membership fee with a great deal of discipline. This remains, next to the European Commission funding, a key source of income for EBU, allowing us to have a very healthy financial situation.

Roland Studer

Treasurer, European Blind Union

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The EBU [Focus newsletter in 2023](#) was specifically on our members and how they interact with EBU.

The [EBU Member's newsletter](#) is made up of contributions from our members, general news and information on issues relevant to our target group and an important feature is the regular campaign updates provided by the Head of Campaigning.

As part of the ongoing series of bilateral exchanges between members organised by EBU, the Croatia Blind Union (CBU) and Czech Blind United (SONS) enjoyed mutual visits to their respective offices in July and September.

EBU also began a hopefully regular series of visits by the secretariat team to member countries, to get to know them better and foster closer working relationships. [Two visits](#) were organised in 2023, to Ireland and Belgium, where the EBU delegation was warmly received by our members on both occasions. In combination with other events, members of the secretariat team were also able to visit members in Poland, Montenegro and Cyprus.

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1 Development of institutional and media database

Throughout the year, EBU continued to establish further contacts with journalists and communication officers, as well as other professional profiles, from other disability-related organisations in order to expand our network of contacts.

Among others, we used the European Disability Forum Communication Officer's group to disseminate position papers, press releases and other materials, thus spreading the word about our work at a European level. This allowed us to feature on EDF's Weekly Newsletter many times in 2023.

At the same time, we were also invited to be part of the International Disability Alliance's CRPD Forum Mailing List. This has opened us a way to a worldwide community where we can share the results of our advocacy and campaigning activities.

Finally, thanks to some of our projects, we were also able to meet new key contacts outside the third-sector area: for instance, as a result of a webinar on Audio Description, we were approached by ARTIS Project, an Italian company working in the AD sector who asked us to give patronage to the AUDECON Conference that took place in Rome (Italy) on 14th November.

2 Op-Ed pieces and other media appearances

In 2023, our organisation managed to publish five articles focused on key areas in the lives of blind and partially sighted persons in Europe. Overall, we published three pieces in Social Europe and two in The Parliament Magazine.

Among them, we highlight [our Head of Advocacy and Campaigning, Antoine Fobe, reflection on the EU Disability Card directive proposal by the EU Commission](#) or our [Executive Director, Lars Bosselmann, analysis on the impact of the energy crisis on people with disabilities](#).

Moreover, although these speaking opportunities were not directly managed by EBU itself, Lars also featured in interviews at [BBC in Touch](#) and French Radio Broadcaster [Vivre FM](#).

3 Social Media

EBU kept feeding its Social Media channels ([Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [X](#)) on a daily basis, uploading posts from once to three times per day. The publications featured different items of our advocacy work and past activities; in the case of X, it was also used to do live coverage of certain events such as the 2023 European Day of Persons with Disabilities or the final webinar of the UPowerWAD project.

By the end of the year, we had 5,327 followers on X, 577 on LinkedIn and 271 on Facebook.

4 The EBU In Action Podcast

Our organisation produced four episodes of our podcast once every three months. The segments were all published on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#) and [Podbean](#), as well as [in the focus section on our website](#) with their transcripts.

Although we couldn't access data of the first two platforms, our episodes registered more than 100 downloads on Podbean. Among others, we produced a [segment about Artificial Intelligence](#) or a debate about the [EU Disability Card proposal of the European Commission](#).

5 #ViewsOfLife

Since the start of 2023, EBU participated in the co-production of the series of interviews “#ViewsOfLife”, an initiative from Julius Kratky, an Austrian journalist working for broadcaster ORF Connect, where he talks to blind and partially sighted people from our different National Members about the different activities within their organisations.

Through the eight episodes ([see the focus section on our website](#)) produced last year, we got a better insight about the main challenges of people with visual impairment in countries such as [Finland](#), [Ireland](#), [Montenegro](#) and [Poland](#), among others.

6 Internet

The [EBU website](#) is regularly updated and continues to be a major channel of communication for EBU activities and issues related to the visually impaired community. The website attracted an average of 10,000 visitors every month. We also decided to include an automatic translation feature on the website to improve access to visitors worldwide.

7 EBU responses to EU consultations

In 2023 EBU published [Position Papers](#) or responses on 6 key topics including the development of the [European Disability Card](#), Braille, and the forthcoming European elections.

8 The EBU Annual Conference

The [2023 EBU annual conference](#), held in Madrid, was entitled “People on the Move: Making educational and professional experiences abroad fully inclusive!”. Hosted by ONCE, the conference, held from November 6th to 8th, gathered 35 young participants from EBU national organisations, experts, and advocates to discuss and share insights. The [Madrid Declaration](#) was the final document resulting from the conference.

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1 Representation

We travelled to Brussels to attend the [launch of the AccessibleEU resource centre](#), one of the flagship initiatives of the European Commission' Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We were eager to accompany the implementation by the European Commission of the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030. In particular, we played an active role in the new EU Disability Platform and its subgroups subgroups on the disability card, on AccessibleEU, and on the Disability Employment Package. We also attended all meetings about AccessibleEU, progressively realising the potential of this new resource centre for the pooling of best practices and recommendations for standardisation.

Other key meetings we attended include the annual European Day of Persons with Disabilities conference and a structured dialogue meeting organised by the Disability and Inclusion unit (D.3) of the European Commission's DG Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) about the dialogue with the UN CRPD Committee in the context of the on-going review of the EU.

We were invited to speak at various thematic events, including:

- A European Commission DG MOVE High-Level Group of Experts on Road Safety.
- A webinar on road safety for all, organised by VIAS Institute (Belgium) in the framework of the European Commission-led European Road Safety Charter (the largest civil society platform on road safety).
- A European Disability Platform (EDF) webinar on the implementation of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive.
- An IAPP Accessibility event, to speak about e-books and payment terminals in relation to the European Accessibility Act, alongside FEP and ING bank.

We responded to various public consultations of direct interest to blind and partially sighted people, including on the European disability card initiative, the Creative Europe programme, and the Marrakesh Treaty, the standardisation regulation, multimodal cross-border transport, silent vehicles, passenger rights, and Erasmus+.

We started to sensitise our membership about the potentialities of engaging in the European Semester process to raise country-specific concerns at EU level.

Our advocacy and campaigning focused on the following areas, in line with our Strategic Orientation Plan.

2 Participation in public life

We used every communication window of opportunity – including around the EU Fundamental Rights Agency report – to press the EU Council to go through with the reform of the EU Electoral Code and for this reform to be in place in time for the European elections in 2024. Noteworthy was the outcome of the EU high-level event on elections, announced in the Democracy Action Plan: a Spanish Presidency Declaration (endorsed by 20 Member States) on “Expanding Voting Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, supported by the European Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC) and EDF, containing to “Ensure, through reasonable accommodation, the accessibility of the whole electoral process to facilitate the possibility of voting independently and in secret.” At the European Day of Persons with Disabilities conference, we asked the Council to match this declaration with progress of the reform of the EU Electoral Code.

Based on the output of our Accessible Voting Awareness-raising project and on further input from our members, we contributed, including through participating in a focus group for civil society organisations, to the development of the European Commission’s Guide of good electoral practice to address the needs of Persons with disabilities, prepared by DG Justice and Consumers (JUST). The guide is very comprehensive and well reflects our recommendations as far as the needs of visually impaired voters are concerned.

3 Non-discrimination

We analysed the ESPN comparative study for the European Commission on social benefits for persons with disabilities, to pinpoint the most problematic aspects. We built on this analysis for one point of our Statement on European Parliament elections, i.e., the call to remedy the lack of reliable and comparable data at EU level on the additional costs of living for persons with disabilities. This is also connected with our call for the concerned EU Member States to remedy the “disability benefits trap”, whereby one may lose their benefits if engaging in paid employment.

We continued to advocate for improved data on persons with disabilities, calling for data disaggregated by type of disability, namely in exchanges with the EU Sustainable Development Indicators team about the EU SDG indicator set 2023, as well as in the context of the CRPD review of the EU, the EU Disability Platform plenary and the European Day of Persons with Disabilities 2023.

On the latter occasion, Eurostat showcased some very significant improvements, which we eventually welcomed in a public [statement](#) after carefully analysis, while continuing to ask for data to be further disaggregated by type of disability, to reflect the specific situation of visually impaired people in key aspects of daily life, not just to quantify the respective types of functional limitations and their seriousness.

4 Access to culture

Through various channels, we carried on with our advocacy to promote an audio description conditionality in EU funding to the film industry through the Creative Europe/MEDIA programme. Namely, we responded to the European Commission’s public consultation on the three-year evaluation of seven EU executive agencies, including EACA, the EU executive agency for Creative Europe, and to its call for evidence for the mid-term evaluation of Creative Europe. We wrote an Op-ed article for the Social Europe magazine. We were interviewed for a European Research Council funded project, about the EBU’s action for access to culture and the EU performance in this area.

Interestingly, in 2023, libraries in European countries outside the EU/EEA (except Andorra and Monaco) could already rely, under national legislation,

on Marrakesh Treaty-type rights, without having to pay a compensation. Nevertheless, we continued to promote the Marrakesh in the region. In concertation with our Albanian member, we pressed the Albanian minister of justice to ratify the Treaty and pass a national reform – which eventually it did in 2023. We provided our Ukraine member with arguments to convince their parliament to open the way for ratification by Ukraine – which also happened in 2023. In concertation with our North Macedonia member, we assisted wrote to the EU (European External Action Service) Representative in the country to support their message to the government that it is necessary to join the Treaty regardless of the recently adapted national legislation. We used the opportunity of a plenary meeting of the EU Disability Platform to ask the EEAS and the European Commission’s DG NEAR representatives to promote the Treaty in wider Europe.

As far as the situation within the EU/EEA internal market is concerned, we contributed to the European Commission’s assessment of the implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty Directive, through input for the Visionary Analytics study and a response to the Commission’s call for evidence and targeted consultation for the evaluation of the EU’s legal framework. Throughout the consultations, together with EDF, we liaised with the Commission’s DG CNECT Unit responsible for copyright issues about our concerns, namely to challenge arguments from the publishing industry that the European Accessibility Act undermines the relevance of the Treaty and that the motivation of publishers to produce accessible format books would be affected by the ‘competition’ of authorised entities. We also attended as speaker a European Parliament Culture and Education (CULT) committee meeting with stakeholders for the own-initiative report on “The future of the European book sector”.

5 Inclusive design

We continued to provide support to ANEC (the voice of consumers in European standardisation) and EDF for lobbying of CEN on the review of the European Accessibility to Lifts standard (EN 81-70). On ANEC request and in concertation with our partners, we issued a [statement](#) on why the need for both embossed characters and Braille marking for operating buttons of lifts, to address the opposing arguments within the relevant working group (WG7). On direct invitation, we attended a WG 7 meeting in Madrid, to defend our position on the matter.

In the wake of the implementation of the European Accessibility Act, building on the output of our Pay-Able task-group, we produced EBU recommendations for accessible payment terminals. We have widely circulated these recommendations, including to EDF, the European Commission, ANEC, AccessibleEU and the Chair of the relevant European standardisation working group (ETSI/CEN/CENELEC Joint Working Group working on review of EN 301 549, the European standard for accessibility of ICT). We also started engaging with industry organisations to test their reaction to our recommendations.

6 Mobility

The European Commission's initiative to establish a European Disability Card and a European Parking Card for persons with disabilities retained our full attention, as instruments to ensure the mobility of visually impaired people in the respect of the equal treatment principle – especially since it was the response to a long-standing call of disability organisations.

We were widely consulted by the Commission on its initiative, together with other civil society organisations, through a call for evidence, a survey and a workshop organised by Ernst and Young, a public consultation, and a confidential briefing shortly ahead of the publication of the proposed directive. We successfully advocated for an accessible-format Word version of the online public consultation to be available. Many of our recommendations were taken on board by the Commission in the pre-proposal phase, most importantly the need to keep the two card separate even if established by a single act, and the need to also cover stand-alone third-country nationals residing legally in the EU – which took the form of a parallel proposal.

After publication of the proposals, we also participated in the dialogue to evaluate them. We issued a [statement](#) with our preliminary analysis and eventually a proper [position paper](#) with recommendations to improve the text of the proposed directive. We liaised closely with EDF for the consistency of asks and arguments in lobbying. We actively lobbied key Members of the European Parliament as well as the Spanish and future Belgian presidencies of the EU. We instructed our member organisations in the EU for lobbying their governments.

Our main standing criticism was the missed opportunity to address the often long period of legal limbo, for people moving their residence to another EU Member State (not just travelling), before their disability status is recognised in the new country of residence. We were very vocal about this shortcoming in two Op-ed articles for Social Europe, as well as in a podcast with the joint participation of the European Citizens Action Service (ECAS), ally to our cause.

All in all, our action together with other disability organisations in 2023 resulted in a much improved text for the directive, as agreed in 2024, including a call on the Commission, in the directive itself, to address the gap described above.

7 CRPD review of the European Union

We continued to follow and influence the dialogue between the UN CRPD Committee and the EU, in the context of the on-going review of the EU, this time to push for a meaningful response on the EU side. We participated in a structured dialogue meeting organised by EMPL D.3, where, besides supporting the EDF messages, we stressed our 3 main concerns: The EU official report to the Committee, published in May, proved satisfactory as regards responding to criticism about disability-related data collection: the Commission will “investigate the feasibility of disaggregating data by type of impairment”; less so on the use of EU funding (i.e., Creative Europe/MEDIA) to promote audio description, and it was silent on defaults of implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty due to silent of the CRPD Committee on the matter in the first place.

8 European elections 2024

We started preparing our campaign around the European Parliament elections of June 2024, including a communications campaign in Spring 2024 and post-elections activities targeting the newly composed Parliament and Commission.

On International Democracy Day, we published our manifesto for the elections in the form of a ten-point [statement](#) highlighting key issues for the next European legislature. We sent this statement to all 10 EU-level political parties and were invited by PES and the Greens to meetings of consultation with civil society organisations. We asked our national member organisations in the EU to bring the same messages to their parties at national level for the European elections.

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1 Low vision



Low vision aids in use at the EBU General Assembly

The EBU member in Slovenia organised a series of 3 webinars entitled “Enhancing Life and Work for People with Low Vision” focussing on employment, assistive technologies and mental health.

2 The importance of Braille

EBU carries out important and extensive work on Braille. In 2023 we produced a high quality [video on the importance of Braille](#). The video is also available in [Dutch](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Portuguese](#), [Slovak](#), [Spanish](#) and [Swedish](#).

In September 2023, EBU issued an important position paper on [Access to Reading and Using Braille – a matter of the future](#). The position paper clearly states the situation concerning braille use and states also important recommendations for all members to consider within the frame of their respective national situation and try to promote braille and its usage in each country. Other languages of the document are available on the Livingbraille forum, in the article [European Blind Union issued a Position paper about braille](#).

EBU was invited by La Fédération des Aveugles et Ambylopes de France (an association within our French member, CFPsAA) to a webinar about accessible reading in September and, just after, participated in a round table in the French Ministry of Culture. to discuss Braille's potential registration as cultural heritage at UNESCO.

The EBU Braille working group [hosted a webinar](#) on November 7th to present the results of its work and on-going projects.

3 Audio Description

The AD working group prepared an exhaustive [handbook for high quality audio description on screen](#). It explains the principles of good audio description, the correct use of grammar and vocabulary. It was introduced to the general public in an online webinar that was held on 17th of May 2023.

A meeting of AD working group members took place in Hilversum, Netherlands, on 10th - 12th of October 2023 to evaluate the training material already produced and lay the basis to produce future online workshops on AD.

4 Employment and working for younger people

In September, we produced [EBU guidance on reasonable accommodation for visually impaired employees and applicants](#) (pdf), to accompany the European Commission's [Disability Employment Package \(External link\)](#) initiative, an element of the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030.

Francesca Sbianchi, the International Relations Officer of EBU member in Italy, co-organised the [2023 ICC camp](#) (International Camp on Communication and Computers) that was held in Telč in Czech Republic from 17th to 23rd of August. ICC is now turning into an event of growing European impact, which can only be consolidated through the collaboration with the movement of persons with visual disabilities at European and national level.

Francesca also represented EBU in the [final conference of the AccessibleEU project](#) – Shaping a youth-driven & inclusive European society. The aim of the project is to raise awareness about European citizenship among young people in different countries and in particular what is required to shape an inclusive

Europe that better takes into consideration the specific need of persons with disabilities.

EBU was also present at the [InEvo 2023 partnership building event](#) by one of the members of the EBU Working Group on Youth, Ines Hlevnjak, also representing on that occasion the Croatian Blind Union.

5 Accessibility of technology

In June, EBU co-hosted a webinar on web accessibility with the French NGO La Fédération des Aveugles et Amblyopes de France (FAF). An activity organized within the context of the [UPowerWAD project](#), the event gathered 25 people with a background in the fields of disability advocacy and VET (Vocational Education and Training) services in France. EBU also took part in the concluding online seminar of the project held in November.

We alongside other DPOs, were invited to an [exchange on accessibility at Apple](#) on February 3, EBU was represented by Bart Simons, one of our accessibility experts, from Belgium.

6 Euro coins and banknotes

EBU has collaborated with the [European Central Bank](#) (ECB) since the (€) euro design phase in the 1990s. This was to ensure that accessibility features on the coins and banknotes were fit for purpose.

The ECB regularly consults the EBU and did so during the development of the second series of euro banknotes, the Europa series. This collaboration is ongoing and representatives from the ECB visited the EBU offices in 2023 to discuss future updates to the currency and ensure continued and improved accessibility. They also attended a meeting of the EBU Liaison Commission meeting in Brussels testing the feasibility of Braille on the future banknotes.

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In order to share our specific experiences and expertise, promote exchange within networks and combine our voices on common dossiers, we regularly work with partners and friends. These fruitful and friendly collaborations take the form of exchanging expertise to prepare joint position papers, articles or press releases, or responding together to consultations.

Our wide range of activities also allow us to collaborate with third-party organisations (universities, industrial partners, other NGOs).

The collaboration with EDF, the European Disability Forum, is ongoing as we were one of the founder members, together with other disability organisations. EBU is represented in a number of EDF working bodies so that the visual impairment dimension is fully considered. EBU continues to collaborate closely with EDF on a number of important campaigns, and this has proved to be an effective collaboration.

1 Solidarity with our friends worldwide

In 2023, EBU continued to work with WBU, a particular focus being on the situation in Ukraine. Through that collaboration, our common Ukrainian member, UTOS received ongoing financial support via a partnership established with the National Assembly of Persons with Disability of Ukraine to cope with the dramatic situation on the ground.

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This publication is co-funded by the European Union.

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