



**KCSS**  
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

# WHY KOSOVO INSTITUTIONS MUST URGENTLY ENHANCE THE SECURITY OF ITS WATERS?

## BUILDING CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE RESILIENCE



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## About the Emerging Threats Programme

The Emerging Threats Programme has been designed as a response to evolving domestic, regional, and international security threats. Its primary aim is to consolidate and provide a better understanding of emerging threats that consistently move away from traditional conceptualizations of security challenges. Given the extent of evolving threats related to cybersecurity and disinformation, this programme seeks to build upon internal organizational capacities to provide evidence-based expertise to operationalize institutional responses to these challenges. Evidence-based research in relation to the Emerging Threats Programme focuses on: critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, disinformation and hybrid security challenges. While needs assessment(s), monitoring and research remain fundamental actions to be developed in the programme, KOSS aims to utilize expertise generated to directly enhance the capacities of executive institutions and agencies to respond effectively to cybersecurity challenges and disinformation. The programme will be developed through:

- State of the art evidence-based research related to emerging threats such as cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, hybrid threats and disinformation;
- Awareness-raising campaigns and targeted advocacy to improve the level of understanding of challenges related to cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, hybrid threats and disinformation in Kosovo;
- Awareness-raising campaigns and targeted advocacy to improve the level of understanding of challenges related to cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, hybrid threats and disinformation in Kosovo.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, threats to critical infrastructure have increased. This is primarily due to growing global threats and the digitalization of key operational processes, including those in the water sector. Consequently, the Government of Kosovo, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, has placed significant emphasis on ensuring resilience in this sector.

While Kosovo has legislative frameworks in place on protecting critical infrastructure, including the Water Law and Law on Critical Infrastructure, there are gaps in implementation. Furthermore, there is a lack of full alignment with the EU Water Framework Directive. Comprehensive integration and legislative amendments are necessary for effective water management.

As regards the Law on Critical Infrastructure, the main caveats in its implementation currently derive from Kosovo's Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) delays in establishing responsible enforcement mechanisms. In parallel to the infancy of establishing the mechanisms, there was a need to amend the existing legislation to align it with the newest legislation of the EU in place. Reportedly, the current draft law that has been circulated does not clearly define the critical infrastructure sector. The water sector is not under the critical infrastructure law alone. Rather, it is also subject to the Law on Waters of Kosovo that provides details on how the water resources are managed, protected and used. It specifies the duties of various institutions, such as the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, in the management and protection of water resources. But as with the critical infrastructure law, the Law on Waters is unable to comply fully with EU rules, especially in terms of integrated water management and environment protection.

Overall, Kosovo's water infrastructure encompasses water supply systems, treatment facilities, distribution networks, and flood management structures. Due to its geographical characteristics, Kosovo is highly susceptible to water resource scarcity. Despite some modernization efforts, much of the infrastructure remains outdated, and the country faces considerable challenges from urbanization, agricultural demands,

and climate change. Recent investments in this sector have primarily focused on the maintenance and upgrading of existing water capacities. However, no significant strategic investments aimed at enhancing water resilience have been made over the past decades. Water infrastructure governance is fragmented, and lacks proper coordination mechanisms, which hampers the implementation of effective and coordinated actions to address sector challenges.

Climate change does seem to have impacted its weather significantly, manifested by prolonged dry seasons followed by rapid heavy rains causing heavy flooding and exposing the limited capacities of the water canalization systems. Water pollution too remains, and water quality continues to persist a major challenge that this sector faces.

The threat from intentional acts targeting critical infrastructure in Kosovo, including sabotage or other malicious activities, is on the rise. However, incidents like the Iber Lepenc attack may not be classified as acts of international terrorism but rather as localized or politically motivated actions. The recent attack involving explosives against the Ibër-Lepenc Water Channels in November 2024, similar to the Banjska incident in September 2023, has raised questions about the possible involvement of Serbia. These allegations were highlighted by Kosovo's Ministry of Internal Affairs, which stated that evidence points to cross-border influences. The American Embassy in Kosovo publicly condemned these attacks, underscoring the gravity of the threats to critical infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the group responsible for the Banjska attack is known to operate within Serbian territory, its notorious principal terrorist Milan Radoicic moves freely in Belgrade and keeps strong links with Serbian President Vucic as well as the SNS ruling political party. In this context, Serbia's potential involvement may include either direct support or facilitation of actions targeting Kosovo infrastructure by entities operating within its borders.

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1. <https://telegrafi.com/en/The-United-States-condemns-the-attack-on-the-Iber-Lepenci-canal%2C-we-have-offered-our-full-support-to-identify-the-criminals/>

This situation raises concerns about the emergence of state-sponsored terrorism that may impact not only Kosovo but also the Western Balkans. Such continued behaviour could pose significant risks not only to essential infrastructure but to regional peace itself. Russia's influence in the region fosters instability, using disinformation and pressure to deepen local tensions. It could escalate from disrupting stability to enabling extremist groups, aiming to block the region's integration with the West. At the same time, critical infrastructure remains vulnerable to terrorist attacks, including those driven by religious motives, compounded by the lack of a clear strategy to protect it.

**The critical infrastructure in Kosovo requires immediate actions as follows:**

- > Urgent update and implementation of the new Law on Critical Infrastructure;
- > Adjusting and tailoring national strategies and safety protocols with respect to critical

infrastructure;

- > Further alignment of the water legislation with the EU Water Framework Directive;
- > Upgrading and coherently maintaining the aging infrastructure and expanding wastewater treatment;
- > Encouraging public-private partnerships and improving water quality control;
- > Strengthening institutional frameworks and enhancing climate resilience in water management;
- > Ensure physical safeguarding of the infrastructure, especially in the parts that are considered essential;
- > Coordinated efforts, increased investment, and international cooperation are essential to ensure sustainable and resilient water infrastructure, supporting Kosovo's aspirations for EU membership and benefiting its population and environment.

# 1. CURRENT STATE OF WATER RESOURCES IN KOSOVO

Situated in the central region of the Balkan Peninsula with an average elevation exceeding 600 meters above sea level, Kosovo is significantly impacted by the scarcity of water resources. The primary sources of water are the melting ice from the Sharr and Rugova mountains, which supply four river basins shared with neighbouring countries. Although there has been some modernization of water infrastructure over the past two decades, rapid urbanization, agricultural demands, and global warming continue to present escalating challenges to Kosovo's water resources. The recent rapid trends of digitalization of the water critical infrastructure sector following the growing threats from terrorism including the state-sponsored one, raises the need for major investments and security measures in this sector.

The water infrastructure in Kosovo consists of four key pillars: water supply systems, water treatment facilities, distribution networks, and flood management infrastructure.

Water supply systems comprising Surface water sources, with main rivers Drini I Bardhe, Ibri, Morava e Binces and Lepenci; Groundwater Sources, from aquifers and wells are crucial, particularly in rural areas. Notable aquifers include those in the Dukagjini and Fusha e Kosovës regions. Additionally, the water supply system relies on artificial lakes and reservoirs such as Batllava, Ujmani, Badovci, Radoniqi etc.

which are crucial for water supply and irrigation. Numerous rivers and lakes provide essential support for agriculture, industry and domestic use;

Water Treatment Facilities which include Drinking Water Treatment Plants that ensure that urban populations have access to clean drinking water: Facilities like the Batllava and Badovc plants treat water for safe consumption. Wastewater Treatment in Kosovo is limited, with only a few operational plants. This results in many urban centers discharging untreated or partially treated wastewater into rivers, leading to pollution and public health concerns;

Distribution Networks consisting of an extensive network of Pipelines and Pumping Stations: of pipelines and pumping stations, distribute treated water to households, businesses, and industries. Urban areas have relatively developed systems, while rural regions often face challenges in water access and quality;

Flood Management Infrastructure that comprises Embankments and Dikes as an infrastructure to prevent flooding, particularly in areas near major rivers, is crucial. However, much of this infrastructure needs upgrading and maintenance. Also, effective drainage systems are essential for managing excess water during heavy rainfall, especially in urban areas prone to flooding.

## 2. LEGAL REGULATION OF THE WATER CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The water sector in Kosovo is regulated by Kosovo Water Law (No. 04/L-147).<sup>2</sup> This law manages all water resources and administration, water use, water protection and protection against water-related risks. It sets out authority for water management, the measurement and mapping of flood risk, the creation of flood risk management policies, and the building and maintenance of flood defenses. The amendments also covered central and local coordination and public participation in flood management decisions. The Law on Waters of Kosovo aligns with the EU Water Framework Directive (EU Directive 2000/60/EC), adopting an integrated approach to water management. Similarities include the requirement for River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) for sustainable water use. Full transposition is feasible in areas like Water Quality Management, Pollution Control, and Economic Instruments. However, the law contains loopholes and inconsistencies, such as unclear definitions and contradictions in key concepts, and partial application of the EU Directive.

Kosovo has adopted the Law on Critical Infrastructure (2018) enforced from April 2019, and it provides a comprehensive legislative framework for the protection of critical infrastructures, including the water sector<sup>3</sup>. This law initially complied with EU regulations and best practices internationally, to deal with risks related to natural hazards, terrorist acts and other dangers that might threaten critical infrastructure. Nevertheless, the problem with it was its lack of implementation due to the failure of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to establish the envisaged mechanisms. In 2022 the EU adopted the new Directive (NIC 2) which made significant

regulatory changes. As a result, the revision of this law has been included in the 2024 legislative agenda. A draft of this law has already been sent to the assembly. Key shortcomings present in the previous law, such as the lack of a precise definition of critical infrastructure, also appear in the new draft. The law should provide clearer guidelines on the definition of water-critical infrastructure, despite its relative identifiability compared to other sectors. At the same time, given the rising vulnerability of critical infrastructure, including the water sector, it is crucial to simultaneously amend the law and consolidate the mechanisms responsible for it.

Part of the legislation dealing with safety and security aspects of the critical infrastructure, including water is also Law no./L- 027 for protection against Natural and other disasters. <sup>4</sup> This law regulates the protection and rescue of people, animals, property, cultural heritage and the environment against natural and other disasters. Another important piece of legislation that covers the water sector is Law No.06/L-035 on Hydrometeorological activities.<sup>5</sup> This law determines the manner of conducting meteorological activities, early warning systems, expertise, products and services offered by these activities, to support the information, local and central institutions and the public as well as international and regional institutions. Law no. 03/L-025 on Environmental Protection<sup>6</sup> on the other hand, strives to harmonize economic development and social welfare with basic principles for environmental protection according to the concept of sustainable development.

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2. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=8659&langid=2>

3. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=16313>

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4. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2775>

5. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=18129>

6. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2631&langid=2>



### 3. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTING WATER CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Aside from adopting the legislation, there are strategies, and action plans relevant for ensuring effective water resource management and protection. Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy and Action Plan 2016 – 2020<sup>7</sup> is one of the most important such documents, however it appears that the document has not been renewed since its expiration in 2020. This law is supposed to project sustainable development, integrate disaster risk reduction into development plans and policies, and build community capacity to deal with disasters. On the other hand, Kosovo institutions appear to have recently adopted a new State Strategy of Waters 2023–2027 and Action Plan 2023–2025.<sup>8</sup> This strategy aims to plan effective management of water resources to ensure the quantity of water and its proper quality, for the needs of the population and economic development. Another strategy related to the water sector in Kosovo is Climate Change Strategy 2019– 2028 and Action Plan 2019– 2021<sup>9</sup> which aims to provide a comprehensive climate change mitigation policy framework based on the present level of information. A Climate Change

Adaptation component is crucial for responding to and anticipating the impacts of climate change in Kosovo. These current and anticipated impacts include exposure to hazards such as droughts, floods, and forest fires which will become greater with climate change. Nevertheless, in one domain in which water critical infrastructure sector does not appear to have provided the special focus is within the frame of security and rule of law-related strategies. Security and rule of law-related strategies such as Kosovo Security Strategy 2022–2027<sup>10</sup>, Kosovo Defense Strategy, and National Strategy and Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Terrorism for 2023–28 do not seem to prioritize critical infrastructure threats posed by terrorist attacks, including by those sponsored by foreign state actors. Given the heightened global security risks following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the potential threats have significantly increased. Therefore, revising strategies with a focus on critical infrastructure is essential.

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7. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/kos170267.pdf>

8. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=78647>

9. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=29356>

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10. <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2-Strategjia-e-Sigurise-e-Kosoves-ENG.pdf>

## 4. GENERAL WATER SECTOR CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE VULNERABILITIES

Kosovo encounters several issues with its water system. Old Infrastructure, Old Water Distribution & Supply system, Regular leaks, loss and shutdown. The degraded infrastructure compromises the stability of water and disrupts home, work and agriculture. The wrong kind of modernisation and upkeep is not done so a steady supply of water cannot be assured.

Overall, the investment in the construction, maintenance and upgrade of water infrastructure remains relatively low. State-owned water companies are heavily reliant on foreign funding and loans to cope with the ongoing water crisis. However, these external funds are insufficient to meet the growing demand. The primary obstacle to achieving sustainability in the water sector is the lack of adequate local financing and investment. However, a lack of local finance and investment in water is the biggest challenge to sustainability.

Kosovo should diversify water production, especially in the Kosovo Valley region keeping in mind the shortage of sustainable drinking water reservoirs. It is essential that institutions move on with building the artificial lake in Firajë, municipality of Shterpce, which is expected to provide water supply to the broader region of Ferizaj and Gjiilan. This lake is expected to take advantage of the river flow of Lepenc and is expected to have only a limited impact on the cross-border flow of rivers (Kosovo and North Macedonia).

Water quality in Kosovo is threatened by industrial pollution, agricultural runoff, and raw sewage. Major cities discharge untreated or partially

treated wastewater into rivers, harming human health and the environment. Water pollution affects biodiversity and ecosystem services. However, investments and measures to reduce water pollution are still very limited. Extreme weather events due to climate change influence too water availability and distribution. Climate adaptation and water infrastructure resilience are key to sustainable development. Additionally, water governance is relatively dis-coordinated, different institutions are drafted in and so are difficult to coordinate. This system and enforcement environment must be strengthened in support of water conservation. The governance of water resources is somewhat disorganized, involving multiple institutions that are challenging to coordinate. Strengthening this system and improving the enforcement environment is essential to support water conservation efforts.

Finally, it must be pointed out that there is a lack of proper data collection and monitoring to quantify water quality and use River Basin Management Plans effectively. Water quality is often inadequately measured and monitored. Additionally, regular public and stakeholder engagement—essential for ensuring active participation in water management—is frequently overlooked. Moreover, the challenge of securing proper funding and making appropriate investments in water infrastructure and management remains unclear. Developing clear funding plans and attracting foreign investors are critical steps to address these issues.

## 5. DELIBERATE WATER CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE THREATS

The water-critical infrastructure sector in Kosovo appears to be vulnerable not only to environmental and industrial threats but also to deliberate terrorist threats and acts of aggression. Several factors contribute to this vulnerability. First, terrorism (be it religiously or politically motivated) for decades has become a global issue. Kosovo, which has consistently aligned itself with Western allies, particularly in coalitions against religious-based extremism, must remain vigilant to the threats posed by this phenomenon, especially towards critical infrastructure. Despite the current decline in the potency of religious-based extremism, negligence could potentially be fatal.

Secondly, Kosovo remains in a conflictual situation with its northern neighbour Serbia, posing a direct threat both to its territorial integrity but also to its critical infrastructure sector. For decades now especially in the northern part of Kosovo have operated parallel structures supported by Serbian state institutions whose goal was to prevent the integration of the Kosovo Serb community and sabotage the proper functioning of the Kosovo institutions. For decades, there have been concerns about threats orchestrated by Serbian authorities against Kosovo's critical infrastructure. These concerns prominently include the Ujman Artificial Lake (Gazivoda Lake) and its associated water infrastructure, which is crucial for a significant portion of Kosovo in terms of water supply for households, businesses, agriculture, and critical infrastructure such as the Kosovo Electricity Corporation, responsible for approximately 95 percent of the country's internally produced electricity.

The terrorist bombing of the Iber-Lepence Canal system on November 29, 2024, has confirmed existing fears. While the investigation is ongoing and some suspects have been arrested, this attack is associated

with the Banjska Terrorist Attack from September 2023. The 2023 attack involved individuals connected to senior governmental and security institutions in Serbia, none of whom have been detained despite the severity of the incident. Notably, key figures directly involved in that event have been observed with senior government officials in Serbia, suggesting that the Serbian state may be openly supportive of hostile actions towards Kosovo's state institutions, including critical infrastructure.<sup>11</sup>

Given that the Ujman Artificial Lake, Kosovo's most important water reservoir, is located in the Municipality of Zubin Potok which is on the border with Serbia and one of the four northern municipalities along the Iber River, where Serbia has had extensive involvement with parallel structures, it remains a significant point of vulnerability. The Iber-Lepence Water Supply System, which distributes water from the Ujman Reservoir, is also at risk. Therefore, the recent attack underscores the susceptibility of the Ujman Artificial Lake reservoir and the Iber-Lepence water channel system to threats from terrorist groups potentially supported by Serbia.

The explosion in the Iber-Lepence Water Channel threatened water supplies for several Kosovo municipalities and the Kosovo Energy Corporation (KEC). Despite the severity of this terrorist explosion attack, Kosovo institutions quickly managed the damage, avoiding major long-term damage and showing readiness for critical infrastructure attacks. Authorities restored KEC's water supply swiftly, preventing an electricity crisis, though affected municipalities faced water supply interruptions for weeks. Recent discussions include building an artificial lake near KEC to protect this vital infrastructure from future threats, even though such projects take

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11 <https://www.kosovopolice.com/en/critical-infrastructure-of-the-iber-lepenci-water-canal-attacked/>

significant time to implement. Hence, these water-critical infrastructure assets will continue to be vulnerable to adversary state-sponsored terrorist divertive attacks. In this context, state-sponsored terrorism involves act of terrorism backed by nation-state, aiming to destabilize other states or achieve political objectives, often targeting critical infrastructure.

Even though Serbia did not refrain from underlining its relations with terrorist groups such as the Banjska group or organizing parallel structures aimed at sabotaging Kosovo's state institutions, it is not the only external threat posed to Kosovo's critical infrastructure. Many of these parallel and terrorist structures operating in the north have established long-standing ties with Russian secret services, which are interested in destabilizing Kosovo's security. Consequently, while there is no direct evidence of Russia's involvement in this specific attack, the possibility of Russian-inspired terrorist activities carried out by these groups cannot be dismissed. Many of these groups maintain connections with Russian secret services, which have a vested interest in destabilizing Kosovo's security. This influence often manifests indirectly through support, funding, or strategic guidance, potentially facilitated through Serbian state institutions. Such threats could extend to other critical infrastructure sectors beyond water resources.

This situation underscores the urgent need for robust protection of critical infrastructure. Policies regarding the safeguarding of these essential assets should be dynamic and responsive to the evolving nature of threats. While damages from the Iber-Lepence water system attack were minimized due to a swift response from law enforcement and the manageable extent of the damage, future attacks could be more severe, making such effective responses potentially unfeasible. Therefore, it is imperative to enhance preventive measures for the critical infrastructure sector.

Finally, it is important to note that concerns regarding the vulnerability of critical water infrastructure in Kosovo have been expressed not only by the Kosovo Albanian population and institutions but also by K-Serb citizens in areas such as Zubim Potok and Gracanica. These concerns point to fear of potential deliberate attacks on dams in Ujman and Badovc lakes, nearby significant number of K-Serb population lives. The low level of integration and inter-ethnic distrust within the K-Serb community in Kosovo contributes to these fears. While terrorist attacks on dams are difficult to carry out, institutions need to address these concerns by ensuring continuous monitoring of those infrastructures to alleviate the fears of concerned citizens.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Among the key recommendations that Kosovo institutions need to implement urgently are:

- > Adopt the new Law on Critical Infrastructure, and in parallel, revise national security strategies, consolidate relevant mechanisms, and update security protocols in line with the rapidly evolving threats.
- > Align its water legislation with the EU Water Framework Directive (Directive 2000/60/EC) to meet EU standards. This involves implementing integrated water resource management, river basin plans, water quality standards, pollution prevention, and groundwater protection. Legislative integration, along with monitoring and reporting mechanisms, will support Kosovo's EU aspirations and ensure sustainable water resource management.

## Kosovo institutions should also make sure to implement the following recommendations:

- > Upgrade aging infrastructure by modernizing water supply and distribution, replacing old pipelines, fixing leaks, and upgrading water treatment plants.
- > Encourage private sector partnerships to bring investment, technology, and expertise for infrastructure projects.
- > Improve water quality and pollution control by regulating industrial contamination, agricultural

discharge, and sewage effluent; impose fines for violations and reward pollution reduction.

- > Expand wastewater treatment to enhance water quality and pollution control.
- > Increase institutional readiness and particularly physical presence in the most essential parts of the critical infrastructure throughout the territory.
- > Strengthen institutional and legal frameworks, including capacity building for MIA, RRBA, and HMIK through training and development.
- > Urgently to start investment, with the support of the EU, in Firaja artificial lake that will significantly help the households and agriculture in water supply in the southern and eastern parts of Kosovo.
- > Reduce water losses using leak detection and repair technologies like smart meters and sensors.
- > Use public awareness campaigns to educate on water conservation and efficient usage.
- > Plan for climate resilience in water infrastructure by protecting sources from climate change and investing in reservoirs and flood management.
- > Improve erosion and flood control through strategic investments.
- > Invest in new water sources by building reservoirs to double storage and ensure a steady supply.
- > Adopt Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) principles to manage water resources sustainably.

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## About KCSS

Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice.

Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development; identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime; foreign policy and regional cooperation; and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo. This year, KCSS celebrated its 15th Anniversary. For more details about KCSS, you can check on the following official platforms:



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