

NEW REPORT: Authoritarian Controls on Freedom of Movement



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024

# Belarus

8

NOT FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 / 40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	6 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

8 / 100      Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



## Overview

Belarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are openly rigged and civil liberties are severely restricted. In 2020, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who maintains a firm grip over the military and security forces, cracked down on a massive prodemocracy protest movement that was sparked by his reelection in a fraudulent presidential poll. Since then, security forces have violently assaulted and arbitrarily detained journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens who challenge the regime. The judiciary and other institutions lack independence and provide no check on Lukashenka's power.

## Key Developments in 2023

- Ahead of elections set for 2024, lawmakers approved amendments that introduced onerous registration and membership requirements for political parties, and then forced parties to reregister. By October, only four political parties were officially registered, all of which were government-aligned. Ongoing persecution of political opponents, activists, and ordinary citizens has created immense obstacles for electoral campaigning and political mobilization.
- Belarusian authorities continued to support the Russian war in Ukraine, agreeing in March to station Russian tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory. Authorities also deliberately obscured information about the presence in Belarus of thousands of children who were forcibly removed from Ukraine.
- Authorities invoked counterterrorism and antiextremism laws to crack down on independent media outlets, civil society actors, and others.
- The government approved several legislative measures targeting political activists who were forced into exile after the 2020 prodemocracy movement. They included items aimed at preventing them from running for office in Belarus and accessing important consular services abroad.

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

**Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?**

**O / 4**

The president is elected for five-year terms. A two-term limit, reintroduced by 2022 amendments to the constitution, will be imposed after the next presidential election.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka was first elected president in 1994, in the country's only democratic election. Authorities heavily controlled the most recent presidential campaign period, which took place in 2020, and arrested major candidates and activists. Authorities also failed to send a timely invitation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the elections took place without an independent monitoring mission.

The government's claim that Lukashenka won 80 percent of the vote was widely denounced internationally and domestically as fraudulent. A parallel, independent vote count using the mobile phone application Golos, which drew data from nearly 23 percent of polling stations, suggested that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya likely received 13 times more votes than were reported. Tsikhanouskaya—who registered as a presidential candidate after her husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski was arrested, precluding his own presidential run—experienced severe pressure from the authorities and fled the country after the election. Protests after the announcement of the election results were met with disproportionate force, including the use of live ammunition and mass, arbitrary detentions. Lukashenka inaugurated himself in a secret, unannounced ceremony.

**A2** 0-4 pts

**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?**

**O / 4**

Legislative elections in Belarus are tightly restricted. The 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of the National Assembly, are elected by popular vote to four-year terms from single-mandate constituencies. The upper chamber, the Council of the Republic, consists of 64 members serving four-year terms; regional councils elect 56 and the president appoints 8.

The November 2019 parliamentary election was held nearly a year ahead of schedule. Candidates loyal to Lukashenka won every seat in the lower house, while independent candidates won none. OSCE election monitors reported an overall lack of transparency, restrictions on observation of the vote count, and indications of ballot-box stuffing.

Constitutional amendments pushed through in a 2022 referendum introduced a new governing body, the All-Belarus People's Assembly, which has extensive executive and legislative powers. The assembly will include a maximum of 1,200 members serving five-year terms. The amendments establishing it as a constitutional body envision several groups of members, including the incumbent president and former presidents, all national assembly members, judicial and executive representatives, local leaders, and civil society. More than a third of the envisioned members are *ex officio* delegates who will already play roles in the country's repressive governing apparatus. Provisions banning individuals who have held foreign residency or have criminal convictions exclude membership of opposition figures in exile and those who have been prosecuted for expressing dissent. Analysts view the body as a means for Lukashenka to consolidate control and exert influence beyond 2035, when current constitutional provisions will make him ineligible for a new term. The first meeting of the All-Belarus People's Assembly is mandated to take place within 60 days of legislative elections, which will take place in early 2024.

**A3** 0-4 pts

**Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?**

**O / 4**

The legal framework for elections, last amended in February 2023, fails to meet democratic standards. Electoral commission members of all levels are beholden to the government. The composition of electoral commissions and the names of their members are not published. Independent observers have no access to ballot-counting processes and often face interference when they are permitted to work.

Belarus held a constitutional referendum in 2022, which the Central Election Commission said passed with 65 percent of votes, but which was held under restrictive conditions and which democratic governments refused to recognize.

Independent observers were not permitted to monitor the polls, opposition members were not permitted to campaign, and citizens residing abroad were not allowed to vote. Groups of protesters reportedly convened at polling sites, and Reuters reported that 800 people were arrested. The new amendments reintroduced a two-term limit for presidents, which will take effect after the 2025 presidential election. Lukashenka is thus eligible to be reelected through 2035.

The All-Belarus People's Assembly, which will be seated in 2024, has the constitutional right to assess the validity of an election's result, but neither the bill that outlined its operations nor the electoral code provides specific legal grounds for deeming an election illegitimate.

## B. Political Pluralism and Participation

**B1** 0-4 pts

**Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?**

**O / 4**

Political parties face severe legal and practical obstacles. Involvement in political activism can result in loss of employment, expulsion from educational institutions, smear campaigns in the media, fines, property confiscation, threats, harassment, criminal charges, and imprisonment. The law on political parties was amended in February 2023 to introduce more onerous registration and membership requirements, and forced parties to reregister. By October, only four political parties were officially registered, all of which were government-aligned. Opposition parties, including the oldest political party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), were officially dissolved.

The exiled members of the Coordination Council—a civil society group formed in 2020 that sought a peaceful resolution to 2020 postelection violence—were tried in absentia on numerous charges and sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Tsikhanouskaya was tried in absentia in March 2023 and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

**B2** 0-4 pts

**Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?**

**O / 4**

Opposition activity is harshly persecuted, and there is effectively no opportunity for independent candidates to gain power through elections. Belarus has never experienced a democratic transfer of power. In 2020, vast numbers of Belarusians responded enthusiastically to the participation of opposition candidates, but the prodemocracy movement was crushed.

**B3** 0-4 pts

**Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?**

**O / 4**

Private citizens and political candidates have limited opportunities to express their views and make political choices. The police and military used severe, sometimes fatal, violence and arrested and detained over 35,000 people to crack down on the August–November 2020 prodemocracy protests, ensuring that Lukashenka would remain in power. Antigovernment demonstrations during the February 2022 constitutional referendum were also repressed by authorities, who arrested more than 800 people, preventing many from voting. At the end of 2023, more than 1,430 people were being held as political prisoners, according to the rights group Viasna.

**B4** 0-4 pts

**Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?**

**1 / 4**

No registered party represents the specific interests of ethnic, religious, or other minority groups. In recent years, Belarusian authorities have dissolved nonprofit

advocacy groups, charity organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that represented the interests of minority groups, including LGBT+ people and people living with disabilities.

Women formally enjoy equal political rights and make up 40 percent of legislators who were elected in November 2019. However, women are underrepresented in leadership positions, and independent civil society initiatives to raise awareness of issues like gender-based violence and discrimination against women have been unsuccessful. State-sponsored women's advocacy groups and the government refrain from addressing these issues.

Authorities restrict the use of the Belarusian language in official settings, and Belarusian-language ballots were not available during the 2022 national referendum.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

**Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?**

**0 / 4**

The legitimacy of Lukashenka's 2020 electoral victory office is disputed domestically and internationally.

Presidential decrees supersede legislation, according to the constitution. The parliament always supports Lukashenka's policies and rarely initiates legislation on its own. The 2022 constitutional amendments and a January 2023 law on the presidency further entrenched Lukashenka's power, including by guaranteeing that after leaving office, former presidents are granted immunity from prosecution for their actions while president and given a permanent seat in the Council of the Republic.

**C2** 0-4 pts

**Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?**

**1 / 4**

The state controls at least 70 percent of the economy, and graft is encouraged by a lack of transparency and accountability in government. There are no independent bodies to investigate corruption cases, and graft trials are typically closed. Presidential clemency has been issued occasionally to free convicted corrupt officials, some of whom Lukashenka has returned to positions of authority. Spurious bribery and tax evasion charges have been used against Lukashenka's political opponents and human rights activists.

Powerful oligarchs enjoy the protection of the government and adjustment of regulations and government policies in their favor, so long as they channel money to Lukashenka in a quid pro quo arrangement. In 2022, the Belarusian Investigative Center (BIC) revealed a variety of corruption schemes aided by the government totaling at least \$1 billion in 2021–22. According to the BIC, state infrastructure and government contracts have been used to circumvent sanctions imposed by the European Union (EU) and United States.

There were several prominent corruption cases in the meat and dairy production industry in 2023.

**C3** 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0 / 4

The government largely fails to adhere to legal access-to-information requirements, though authorities have moved to make some basic information about government operations and foreign policy available online in recent years. In March 2023, Russia announced that it reached an agreement with the Belarusian government to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, marking a significant shift in policy without any public debate. The same month, Belstat, the national statistics agency, issued an order granting itself the authority to withhold information from the public, citing potential harm to the national security of Belarus, public order, and morals.

## Civil Liberties

# D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0 / 4

The government exercises unrestricted control over mainstream media. The 2008 media law secures a state monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs. Libel is both a civil and criminal offense, and the criminal code contains provisions protecting the “honor and dignity” of high-ranking officials. The government owns the only internet service provider and controls the internet through legal and technical means. It has the ability to disrupt internet access in almost the entire country, block specific webpages, and limit access to social media networks.

The official definition of mass media includes websites and blogs, placing them under the Information Ministry’s supervision. Independent journalists operate under the assumption that the Committee for State Security (KGB) surveils them. Reporters are subject to fines, detention, intimidation, and criminal prosecution for their work, including under harsh antiextremism legislation. The government has cracked down on independent media more forcefully since 2020, and several journalists received lengthy prison sentences in 2023. In March, the internet portal Tut.by’s editor Maryna Zolatava and manager Liudmila Chekina were each sentenced to 12 years’ imprisonment. In August, both were added to the list of extremists, effectively prohibiting public statements in support of their release. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), at least 32 media workers were in prison in 2023. At least 33 media outlets were declared “extremist” during the year, while 12 outlets were declared “terrorist,” according to the BAJ.

In 2021, Belarusian authorities forced an Athens–Vilnius commercial flight to land in Minsk in order to arrest exiled blogger and opposition activist Raman Pratasevich. In May 2023, Pratasevich was sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment,

but was pardoned later that month. Also in May 2023, Pratasevich's codefendants, exiled bloggers Stsiapan Putsila and Jan Rudzik, were sentenced in absentia to 20 and 19 years in prison, respectively.

**D2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?**

**1/4**

Despite constitutional guarantees of religious equality, government decrees and registration requirements restrict religious activity. Legal amendments made in 2002 provided for government censorship of religious publications and barred foreigners from leading religious groups.

The parliament amended the law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations in December 2023, and it was awaiting Lukashenka's signature at year's end. The amendment places strict limitations on religious groups active in Belarus for less than 30 years, expands the list of legal grounds for liquidating a religious organization, and requires all groups to apply for reregistration within 12 months. Unregistered religious organizations will face criminal liability.

The Roman Catholic Church, which in 2020 denounced state violence against peaceful prodemocracy protesters, has since come under government pressure. Several Catholic priests have faced administrative detentions, fines, and criminal charges, and the government has closed at least one Catholic church. In 2022, authorities terminated a decades-old agreement that had allowed Catholic clergy and worshippers to use the Church of Saints Simon and Helena in Minsk.

**D3** 0-4 pts

**Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?**

**0/4**

Academic freedom remains subject to intense state pressure. Academic personnel face harassment and dismissal if they use disfavored curriculum or are suspected of disloyalty. Students who express political dissent risk dismissal.

The government has tightened control over private schools and kindergartens, which has resulted in the closure of many alternative educational centers and has restricted Belarusian-language instruction in schools and universities.

In January 2022, Lukashenka ordered historians to devise a single, unified “correct interpretation of history” to be taught in Belarus, and enacted legislation criminalizing any deviation from the approved historical narrative. The revised textbooks and curricula have since been introduced in Belarusian schools. Authorities also instructed schools that for the academic year beginning in September 2023 they should only use officially authorized teaching materials and should revise how they teach foreign languages in order to foster patriotic feelings.

**D4** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?**

**O / 4**

The use of wiretapping and other surveillance by state security agencies limits the right to free private discussion. Authorities routinely threaten, harass, and arrest people who speak out against Lukashenka, postelection violence, and the war in Ukraine.

Private citizens often avoid discussing sensitive issues over the phone or via the internet for fear that state security agents are monitoring conversations. In 2022, under a presidential decree, telecom operators and website owners were required to connect to a state-designed system that enables online surveillance by the state security services. Authorities actively monitor internet users’ social media activity to find evidence of protest involvement or other dissent. Sharing of social media posts deemed “extremist” has resulted in criminal charges, with ordinary internet users at times sentenced to more than a year in prison. Video surveillance and facial-recognition technology are used to identify and arrest citizens who participated in the 2020 demonstrations. Police often coerce, threaten, and torture detained individuals, forcing them to open their mobile devices in search of evidence of antigovernment sentiment. Security forces also organize raids of private homes, detain people in workplaces, and conduct random searches and

interrogations to silence dissent. Authorities have detained citizens who donated to organizations banned by the state.

In August 2023, Lukashenka signed a decree that provides state security agencies with full access to banking operations of citizens suspected of making unauthorized payments; the law is scheduled to come into force in March 2024.

## E. Associational and Organizational Rights

**E1** 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0/4

The government severely restricts freedom of assembly. Protests require permission from local authorities, who often arbitrarily deny it. Laws impede organizers' ability to raise funds for protests.

Police and military forces only partially succeeded in blocking unprecedented prodemocracy protests in 2020. In the weeks after the year's election, the regime deployed military equipment and armed riot police who indiscriminately attacked and arrested people. Numerous instances of cruel treatment, beatings, and torture of protesters were recorded, with total impunity for the security forces involved. In 2023, the regime was still persecuting people who participated in peaceful demonstrations in 2020. Hundreds of antiwar protesters who turned out to oppose the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine were similarly arrested in 2022, with many facing physical abuse by security forces while detained.

**E2** 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?

0/4

Freedom of association is severely restricted. In January 2022, criminal-code amendments recriminalized participation in unregistered or dissolved

organizations; those accused of participating in such organizations face steep fines and up to two years in prison. Human rights activists who remained in the country following the 2020 prodemocracy protests have faced harassment and threats from security forces. In June 2023, human rights activist Nasta Loika was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment.

Prominent organizations like the BAJ, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, and the Belarusian PEN Center have been ordered to dissolve in recent years. Lawtrend, a rights monitor, reported in December 2023 that at least 960 NGOs were in forced-dissolution processes or had been removed from an official register between 2021 and 2023, while at least 549 had decided to self-liquidate.

The government employs antiextremism legislation against independent organizations and individuals to restrict public outreach and suppress dissent. In August 2023, the Viasna Human Rights Center, one of the oldest human rights organizations in Belarus, was added to the list of “extremist organizations.” The designation also criminalizes sharing information from Viasna channels.

**E3** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?**

**O/4**

Independent labor unions face harassment, and their leaders risk dismissal and prosecution for engaging in peaceful protests. No independent unions have been registered since 1999, when Lukashenka issued a decree setting extremely restrictive registration requirements.

Independent unions were prominent in the prodemocracy movement in 2020, striking to protest the fraudulent presidential election and police violence toward peaceful demonstrators. The state increasingly targeted and pressured workers to prevent them from going on strike. Union leaders and rank-and-file members were arrested, fined, dismissed from their posts, sent to psychiatric institutions, and forced into exile.

Between 2021 and 2023, security forces arrested dozens of workers, accusing them of involvement in an independent labor movement. The arrested workers face lengthy prison sentences on charges of treason, conspiracy, and national-

security related offenses. In December 2022 and January 2023, leaders and activists of a number of trade unions, including the Belarusian Radio-Electrical Manufacturing Workers, were sentenced to prison terms, some as long as nine years.

## F. Rule of Law

**F1** 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0 / 4

Courts are entirely subservient to President Lukashenka, who appoints Supreme Court justices with the approval of the rubber-stamp parliament.

**F2** 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

0 / 4

The right to a fair trial is not respected. In a departure from international norms, the power to extend pretrial detention lies with prosecutors rather than judges. The absence of independent oversight allows police to routinely violate legal procedures. The government regularly attacks attorneys, who often are the only connection between imprisoned activists and their families and society. Lawyers are often denied the right to meet with their defendants. Many lawyers defending political prisoners haven been disbarred or arrested.

**F3** 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0 / 4

Law enforcement agencies regularly employ physical force against suspects, who have little opportunity for recourse if they are abused. Excessive force has been used to extract confessions from detainees. Confessions in which detainees appear beaten, distressed, and humiliated have been recorded, published, and distributed by state agencies.

Belarusian dissidents have resisted the presence of the Russian military, which has used Belarus as a staging ground for attacks against Ukraine. To this end, so-called railway partisans have attacked Belarusian rail infrastructure. In May 2022, Lukashenka enacted new legislation to make such attacks punishable by death. As of February 2023, a number of people had been convicted of engaging in rail sabotage and issued lengthy prison sentences.

**F4** 0-4 pts

**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?**

**O / 4**

Official usage of Belarusian remains rare, and Belarusian is recognized as “vulnerable” by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Authorities have sought to increase the dominance of the Russian language. Since 2021 the government has intensified efforts to restrict the use of the Belarusian language, including by refusing to provide Belarusian-language materials to voters, changing rules requiring transliteration for geographic names, designating certain Belarusian-language materials as “extremist,” and placing restrictions on independent publishing houses. Between January and June 2023, three publishing houses specializing in Belarusian-language publications closed.

Women are prohibited from entering 88 different occupations, and societal norms in much of the country hold that women should be mothers and housewives.

LGBT+ people face widespread societal discrimination, including bias and harassment by public figures, and law enforcement authorities are reluctant to investigate and prosecute attacks against them. If detained for political reasons, LGBT+ people are subjected to harassment and forced public disclosure of their sexual orientation. In 2023, the government began work on a draft law to ban “LGBT propaganda,” which is similar to restrictive legislation in Russia.

There continue to be reports of deaths of asylum seekers and migrants on the Belarusian border with Poland, reportedly after Polish authorities barred them from entering. In 2021, Belarusian authorities deliberately facilitated the transportation of large numbers of asylum seekers and migrants to the border, most from Iraq.

# G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

**G1** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?**

**1 / 4**

Passports are used as a primary identity document in Belarus, and authorities are known to harass people living in a different location than the one indicated by the domestic stamps in their passport. The amended citizenship law that came into force in July 2023 requires Belarusian citizens to submit information about their dual citizenship or residency abroad to police or the Belarusian diplomatic service.

In September 2023, a presidential decree amended the list of consular services available to Belarusian citizens abroad. Under the decree, Belarusians abroad can no longer visit a consular office to renew or extend their passports, register power of attorney, confirm marital status, register a birth, or confirm their education. Among others, the move impacts the rights of Belarusians who fled the country for political reasons and are unable to return to the country. Authorities have canceled the travel documents of dissidents abroad and harassed activists' relatives who remain in Belarus.

In May 2021, the EU banned Belarusian airlines from traveling over its airspace and accessing its airports. Neighboring states closed several border crossings in response to the 2021 border crisis instigated by the Belarusian authorities, as well as the stationing of Wagner Group mercenaries on Belarusian territory in 2023.

From February 2022 to late October 2023, more than 2,400 Ukrainian children between the ages of 6 and 17 were transported to at least 13 government-controlled facilities across Belarus, according to a December 2023 report by the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab. Officials initially denied their presence, but in 2023 the state broadcaster confirmed the presence of Ukrainian children in the country for "rehabilitation." In December, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) suspended the Belarus Red Cross

Society, in part over its involvement in the forced transfer of Ukrainian children to Belarus.

**G2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?**

**1 / 4**

State interference still affects the economy and profitable business owners are never safe from arbitrary government pressure and harassment. Many businesspeople who became involved in postelection prodemocracy efforts were criminally prosecuted on groundless claims. Other business owners who supported candidates other than Lukashenka were arrested under false pretense. Multiple businesses relocated their employees to neighboring countries for fear of state harassment or prosecution.

**G3** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?**

**2 / 4**

Domestic violence is a pervasive problem in Belarus, and police register about 150,000 incidents per year. In 2018, Lukashenka blocked a draft law on the prevention of domestic violence jointly developed by law enforcement agencies and civil society representatives, calling attitudes against the corporal punishment of children “nonsense from the West.” Threats of losing custody of children are often used to intimidate and harass political activists.

The constitution explicitly bans same-sex marriage. Constitutional amendments made in 2022 define marriage as a union solely between a man and a woman. The amendments further declare that marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood are protected by the state, creating further obstacles for same-sex partners to obtain legal recognition and to plan their family life.

**G4** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?**

**1 / 4**

Mandatory unpaid national workdays, postgraduate employment allocation, compulsory labor for inmates in state rehabilitation facilities, and restrictions on leaving employment in certain industries have led labor activists to conclude that all Belarusian citizens experience forced labor at some stage of their life.

Sexual exploitation remains the prevalent form of trafficking in Belarus. The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Actions against Human Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) has concluded that Belarusian authorities contributed to trafficking of human beings and prevented the work of local antitrafficking NGOs.



#### **On Belarus**

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#### ***Country Facts***

**Population**

**9,228,000**

**Global Freedom Score**

**8 / 100      Not Free**

**Internet Freedom Score**

**25 / 100      Not Free**

#### ***Other Years***

**2023**

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