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Observations on the Current State of Administrative Judiciary in Türkiye

Türkiye'de İdari Yargının Mevcut Durumuna İlişkin Gözlemler



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Abstract: There is a significant relationship between the workload of administrative judicial bodies and the effective exercise of the freedom to seek legal remedies in administrative justice, including the right to access courts. This relationship reflects the practicality of claims and objectives regarding compliance with the rule of law, as evidenced by the number of cases administrative courts are required to resolve each year and the time taken for their resolution. At this juncture, it is crucial to promptly and accurately identify the factors that contribute to the increasing workload of administrative courts. Subsequently, the relevant authorities must implement swift and sustainable measures to address these issues. This study evaluates whether judicial oversight of administrative actions in Türkiye complies with the standards of the rule of law. It examines the workload of administrative courts and provides concrete recommendations based on data provided by the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Justice and the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ).

Keywords: Rule of Law, Administrative Judiciary, Judicial Oversight, Workload

Öz: İdari yargı mercilerinin iş yüküyle idari yargıda hak arama özgürlüğünün ve bu kapsamda mahkemeye erişim hakkının etkili şekilde kullanımı arasında ciddi bir ilişki vardır. Söz konusu ilişki doğrultusunda idari yargıda görevli mahkemelerin her yıl çözmekle yükümlü oldukları uyuşmazlık sayısı ve bu uyuşmazlıkları ne kadar sürede çözdükleri, hukuk devleti olma yolundaki iddia ve hedeflerin gerçekçiliğini de gösterir. Bu noktada öncelikle idari yargının iş yükünü arttıran faktörler doğru şekilde ve gecikmeksizin tespit edilmeli, daha sonra ise bu sorunların çözümü için ilgili birimler tarafından hızlı ve kalıcı önlemler alınmalıdır. Çalışmada Türkiye'de idarenin yargısal denetiminin hukuk devleti standartlarına uygun şekilde gerçekleşip gerçekleşmediği, idari yargı mercilerinin iş yükü bağlamında ele alınarak Adalet Bakanlığı istatistikleri ile Avrupa Adaletin Etkinliği Komisyonu (CEPEJ) raporları doğrultusunda konuya ilişkin somut önerilere yer verilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hukuk Devleti, İdari Yargı, Yargısal Denetim, İş Yükü

1. Introduction

The administration holds the privilege of exercising public authority, which allows it to unilaterally produce legal effects. To counterbalance the vulnerable position individuals may find themselves in due to this privilege, access to judicial remedies against administrative acts and actions¹ must be guaranteed. This is particularly crucial to ensure that arbitrary acts and actions of the administration do not violate individual rights and freedoms within the framework of public relations. Judicial oversight of the administration is recognized as a fundamental requirement of the rule of law, primarily because of its intrinsic relationship with fundamental rights and freedoms, including the freedom to seek legal remedies (Akyılmaz, Sezginer and Kaya, 2024).

Türkiye, as one of the countries with an administrative regime, has adopted the separation of judicial jurisdiction and administrative jurisdiction, ensuring that all administrative acts and actions are subject to judicial oversight, as constitutionally guaranteed. Furthermore, Article 125 of the 1982 Turkish Constitution states that judicial remedies are available against all administrative acts and actions, while also defining the limits of administrative judicial authority in line with the principle of separation of powers.

Article 142 of the Constitution states that the establishment, duties, powers, functioning, and procedural rules of courts shall be regulated by law. In Türkiye, the current administrative judicial system was established through three laws: the Council of State Law No. 2575, the Law on the Establishment and Duties of Regional Administrative Courts, Administrative Courts, and Tax Courts No. 2576, and the Administrative Procedure Law No. 2577. All three of these laws came into force on January 20, 1982. In addition to the Council of State, administrative courts, and regional administrative courts, the administrative judiciary system also includes specialized tax courts, which operate independently from general administrative courts. Similarly, within the Council of State and regional administrative courts, there are administrative litigation chambers and tax litigation chambers.

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¹ In Turkish administrative law, there is a distinction between administrative act (idari işlem) and administrative action (idari eylem). This distinction is explicitly included in the Law No. 2577 and is also accepted in the doctrine. Accordingly, in its simplest definition, an administrative act is a unilateral declaration of will by the administration to produce legal results by using public power. On the other hand, an administrative action is defined as the actions of the administration that have physical effects and consequences in the material world as well as in the legal world. (Gözler, 2019). For more detailed information on administrative acts, see (Erkut, 1990) and for more detailed information on administrative actions, see also (Ayanoğlu, 2004).

This study examines the workload of administrative courts, regional administrative courts, and the Council of State, as well as the corresponding level of access to justice in Türkiye. Additionally, in this study, the level of access to justice in Türkiye will be analyzed based on the 2023 judicial statistics2 published by the Directorate General of Criminal Records and Statistics of the Ministry of Justice (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanlığı, 2023) and the reports of the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ). These reports include the general evaluation of the judicial systems of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe (CEPEJ, 2024a) in 2022 and the country profiles provided therein (CEPEJ, 2024b). It should be noted that the CEPEJ reports provide significant data regarding the Turkish administrative judiciary's position among Council of Europe countries, based on criteria such as the number of judges assigned to administrative courts, the current workload of these courts, and the time required to resolve cases. Furthermore, this study seeks to reveal the impact of recent political, social, and legal developments in Türkiye on the workload of administrative courts. Finally, concrete recommendations will be proposed to alleviate the workload of the administrative judiciary.

2. General Overview of First Instance Administrative Judicial Bodies

Within the framework of Türkiye's judicial system, administrative courts were established in 1982 under Law No. 2576 and function as first-instance administrative judicial bodies. Administrative courts are composed of a president and an adequate number of members, with court panels consisting of a president and two members. These courts serve as general jurisdiction courts tasked with resolving all administrative disputes that are not assigned by law to judicial courts. Additionally, administrative courts do not fall within the jurisdiction of specialized courts within the administrative judiciary, such as the Council of State and tax courts (Akyılmaz et al., 2024).

Administrative courts represent the first tier in the judicial resolution of disputes arising from administrative acts, actions, and contracts. To understand the workload and caseload intensity of administrative courts, it is essential to consider factors such as the number of cases filed annually, the number of cases returned following reversals at the appellate and higher appellate levels, and the average duration required to adjudicate a case.

² The numerical data used in this study, unless otherwise specified, were obtained from the publication titled "Justice Statistics," published in 2023 by the Directorate General of Criminal Records and Statistics of the Ministry of Justice. See, https://adlisicil.adalet.gov.tr.

According to the 2023 data from the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Justice, the number of ongoing cases in administrative courts and the number of cases filed annually in these courts have shown a significant increase over the past four years. For instance, the total number of cases in administrative courts was 361,167 in 2020, rising to 498,627 in 2023. Of these, 237,823 cases were initiated in 2019, compared to 337,676 cases in 2023. Interestingly, despite this increase, the average duration of case proceedings in administrative courts has shortened in 2023 compared to 2020 and 2021. Specifically, the average time required to adjudicate a case in administrative courts decreased from 244 days in 2020 to 173 days in 2023. On the other hand, the number of cases returned to administrative courts following reversals by regional administrative courts or the Council of State has also steadily increased. This trend has had a notable adverse impact on the workload of administrative courts.

According to CEPEJ's 2022 report (CEPEJ, 2024a, p. 124), Türkiye ranks among the top Council of Europe member states in terms of the average case resolution and completion time, which stands at 167 days.³ In Türkiye, the percentage of cases pending for more than two years in first-instance courts is 2%, one of the lowest rates among Council of Europe member states.

Additionally, the total number of cases filed annually (including newly filed and reversed cases) per 100 people in first-instance courts in Türkiye is 0.50. This figure is slightly above the median value of approximately 0.40 for Council of Europe member states. At this point, it can be asserted that Türkiye needs to develop permanent and structural solutions in order to reduce the number of disputes in first-instance administrative courts.

2.1. Workload Arising from Disputes under Law No. 6458

According to Ministry of Justice data, when disputes in administrative courts are analyzed in terms of their nature and the legislation they pertain to, disputes arising from Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection rank first. Law No. 6458 was enacted in 2013 to address the fragmentation in the legislation concerning asylum seekers and refugees. Under this law, there has been a significant increase in recent years in disputes stemming particularly from administrative actions related to applications for international protection (Ocak, 2019). For instance, based on case index data for cases filed during the year, the number of lawsuits filed in 2023 is 24 times higher than the number of cases filed in 2015. It should also be noted that out of the

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³ The average case completion time in Council of Europe member states is 396 days (CEPEJ, 2024a).

498,627 cases in administrative courts in 2023, 98,080 originated from disputes under Law No. 6458.4

As a result of the significant increase in the number of disputes arising from Law No. 6458, the average duration of these cases has progressively increased. Namely, while the average resolution time for disputes under Law No. 6458 was 85 days in 2015, this duration rose to 168 days in 2023. It is beyond doubt that this situation is closely linked to the large number of individuals subject to Law No. 6458, particularly those residing in Türkiye due to the ongoing civil war in Syria, as well as the high volume of administrative actions taken concerning these individuals. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the increase in the number of lawsuits has been paralleled by a steady rise in the average case duration for these disputes.

2.2. The Impact of the February 6 Earthquakes on Administrative Judiciary

The most significant event affecting Türkiye in 2023 was undoubtedly the earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş on February 6, 2023. In addition to the numerous adverse consequences these earthquakes brought, they also imposed a substantial burden on the legal system. According to data from the Ministry of Justice, the number of disaster-related lawsuits filed in administrative courts increased dramatically, from 1,621 cases in 2022 (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanlığı, 2022) to 42,254 cases in 2023.

To partially mitigate the impact of the February 6 earthquakes on the workload of the administrative judiciary, the Ministry of Justice established new administrative courts in various provinces within the earthquake-affected region on different dates. In this context, the Osmaniye Administrative Court was established through a decision published in the Official Gazette on April 8, 2023. Subsequently, through another decision published in the Official Gazette on October 27, 2023, a total of 20 additional administrative courts were established across nine provinces in the earthquake zone. These measures aimed to alleviate the burden placed on the administrative judiciary by earthquake-related cases.

The increase in the number of lawsuits arising from administrative actions established after the February 6 earthquakes has created the need for a new judicial procedure that allows for faster resolution compared to the ordinary judicial process provided under

⁴ In terms of the number of cases in administrative courts, the second most common category of disputes pertains to issues related to civil servants, with 82,089 cases, while the third most common category involves full remedy actions with 51,213 cases.

Law No. 2577 on Administrative Judicial Procedures (Çınarlı, Bilgin, Avcıoğlu Aksoy, Çaptuğ Dilek, 2023). In this regard, Provisional Article 11, added to Law No. 2577 through Law No. 7471 published in the Legal Gazette on November 9, 2023, represents a significant step toward implementing an expedited judicial procedure. This legal regulation introduces distinct rules, deviating from the general judicial procedure prescribed in Law No. 2577, for annulment cases filed against administrative actions based on damage assessment reports related to the aftermath of the February 6 earthquakes. The aim of Provisional Article 11 is to accelerate judicial proceedings for these specific disputes. However, it is evident that the administrative courts established in the earthquake-affected regions must become operational as soon as possible to achieve this objective (Çınarlı et al., 2023).

3. Regional Administrative Courts

Regional administrative courts, established in 1982 under Law No. 2576, were initially tasked with reviewing "objection" applications against decisions of first-instance courts prior to the legal amendments of 2014 (Şimşek, 2016). With the aim of reducing the workload of the administrative judiciary, these courts began functioning as appellate bodies on July 20, 2016, marking the transition to a three-tier judicial system in administrative law (Keskin, 2016). Consequently, the appellate process became a general and ordinary legal remedy available against first-instance court decisions (Karahanoğulları, 2019; Ulusoy, 2020).

Decisions rendered by regional administrative courts upon appellate review may only be subject to further appeal before the Council of State (Danıştay) in cases explicitly specified under Law No. 2577. A key distinction between the appellate and cassation processes in administrative judiciary is that while cassation involves only a review of legality, the appellate process entails both substantive and legal review (Çağlayan, 2022).

Following this reform, the role of regional administrative courts within the administrative judiciary expanded significantly. These courts consist of at least two chambers one administrative and one tax. The number of chambers may be increased or decreased by

⁵ In this context, under Provisional Article 11, the preliminary examination period for filed cases has been reduced to 10 days, while the periods for submitting a defense, filing an appeal, and responding to an appellate petition have been shortened to 15 days. Additionally, it has been stipulated that objections cannot be raised against decisions regarding requests for a stay of execution.

the decision of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK), upon the recommendation of the Ministry of Justice.

An analysis of recent data provided by the Ministry of Justice on regional administrative courts reveals a notable increase in both the average duration of case resolution and the case completion rate over the years. For example, the average time required to resolve a case in the administrative litigation chambers of these courts rose from 149 days in 2020 to 194 days in 2023. Conversely, the case completion rate increased significantly during the same period, from 84.1% to 104.4%. Additionally, the number of cases carried over from the previous year in the administrative litigation chambers of regional administrative courts has been steadily increasing since 2018. Another critical indicator of the workload in these courts is the number of cases assigned per judge. In 2020, the number of cases per judge was 763, which escalated to 1,033 by 2023. It is noteworthy that approximately 66% of these cases consist of newly filed cases in regional administrative courts. This figure represents the second–highest case among all judicial bodies, following the Constitutional Court.

According to data from the CEPEJ, the total number of cases (including newly filed cases and those carried over from the previous year) per 100 individuals in regional administrative courts in Türkiye is 0.41 (CEPEJ, 2024b). This figure, which significantly contributes to the heavy workload of regional administrative courts, is far above the median value of approximately 0.1 among Council of Europe member states for this criterion. On the other hand, the proportion of cases pending for more than two years in Türkiye's regional administrative courts is 2% (CEPEJ, 2024a), demonstrating that Türkiye is in a more advanced position compared to many other Council of Europe member states.

3.1. Workload of the Ankara and Gaziantep Regional Administrative Courts

An analysis of the Ministry of Justice's 2023 data for individual regional administrative courts reveals that the Ankara Regional Administrative Court is under a significantly heavier workload compared to the other eight regional administrative courts in Türkiye. Specifically, approximately 37% of the 366,905 total cases, amounting to 135,595 cases, in the administrative litigation chambers of regional administrative courts across the country were handled by the Ankara Regional Administrative Court in 2023.

The primary factor contributing to this disproportionate workload is undoubtedly the high number of cases adjudicated in Ankara's administrative courts under the general

jurisdiction rule stipulated in Article 32 of Law No. 2577. This is because the Ankara Regional Administrative Court is responsible for the appellate review of decisions rendered by Ankara's administrative courts in cases filed against administrative actions taken by central government bodies and numerous other public institutions. Consequently, the workload of the Ankara Regional Administrative Court has reached a substantial level.

Another regional administrative court facing a significant workload is the Gaziantep Regional Administrative Court.⁶ In fact, the administrative litigation chambers of the Gaziantep Regional Administrative Court handle more cases than the combined total in the administrative litigation chambers of the Adana, Samsun, and Erzurum Regional Administrative Courts.⁷ The primary factor contributing to this heavy workload is the disputes arising from Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection. Additionally, the Gaziantep Regional Administrative Court is the designated appellate body for first-instance court decisions from several provinces, including Kahramanmaraş, Adıyaman, and Malatya, which were heavily affected by the February 6 earthquakes. This factor further increases the court's workload. In light of these challenges, the decision of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors to assign the 7th and 9th administrative litigation chambers of the Gaziantep Regional Administrative Court exclusively to disaster-related cases (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Hâkimler ve Savcılar Kurulu, 2023) is a significant and prudent step toward managing this burden.

3.2. Regulations on Monetary Thresholds for Appeals and Cassation in Administrative Judiciary

The number of cases carried over to the next year in the administrative litigation chambers of regional administrative courts consistently increased until 2023. However, there was a partial decrease in the number of cases carried over from 2023 to 2024. This decrease is primarily attributed to the fact that the number of new cases filed in 2023 was approximately 28,000 fewer than in 2022. One of the main reasons for the reduction in case numbers in 2023 is the adjustment of the monetary threshold for appeals pursuant to the relevant legislation. The revaluation rate for 2022 was applied at 122.93%, resulting in an increase in the monetary threshold for filing appeals from

⁶ In 2023, the number of cases in the administrative litigation chambers of the Gaziantep Regional Administrative Court was 53,129.

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⁷ In 2023, the number of cases in the administrative litigation chambers of the Adana Regional Administrative Court was 13,637; in the Samsun Regional Administrative Court, it was 12,628; and in the Erzurum Regional Administrative Court, it was 25,492.

9,000 TL to 20,000 TL. This development significantly impacted the volume of appeal cases. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the uncertainty regarding the effective date for applying the monetary threshold contributed to an increase in the number of final administrative court decisions.

In this context, the Constitutional Court's annulment of the monetary threshold regulations for appeals and cassation in Law No. 2577 (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasa Mahkemesi, K. 2023/184 and K. 2023/142) is a noteworthy development. The annulled provisions had created uncertainty regarding which monetary threshold should be applied when filing appeals in administrative judiciary proceedings (Usta, 2024). This uncertainty affected the stage at which decisions by administrative judicial bodies became final. Additionally, the annulled provisions in Law No. 2577 imposed limitations on the right to seek legal remedies and the freedom to seek justice for the parties involved in disputes (Yılmaz, 2023; Ulusoy, 2024). This, in turn, had implications for the workload of the courts. In response, the legislature considered the Constitutional Court's decisions and amended Law No. 2577 through Law No. 7524, published in the Official Gazette on August 2, 2024. Following this amendment, the monetary thresholds specified for legal remedies are now determined based on the date on which administrative or regional administrative courts render their final decisions. This amendment effectively resolved the existing uncertainty regarding which monetary threshold to apply when seeking legal remedies in administrative courts.

4. The Council of State

The history of the Council of State (Danıştay) dates back to the Ottoman absolutist period, specifically to the "Şûra-yı Devlet", which was officially inaugurated on May 10, 1868 (Özdeş, 1968). While the Şûra-yı Devlet primarily undertook non-judicial functions during this period, it also exercised judicial authority in matters such as civil servant trials and "resolving disputes between the government and individuals" (Karahanoğulları, 2005). Due to the political conditions of the time, the activities of the Şûra-yı Devlet were interrupted from 1922 to 1927. However, it gained its first constitutional basis with the 1924 Constitution (Eraslan, 2020), and Law No. 669 on its establishment entered into force on December 7, 1925. Its organizational structure was later revised under Law No. 3546 on the Council of State (Şûra-yı Devlet), enacted in 1938. With the 1961 Constitution, the institution was renamed the Council of State (Danıştay), and its primary function was defined as judicial function, with its administrative duties reduced to an exceptional level (Sezginer, 2017). The organizational structure of the Council of State

during the 1961 Constitution period was established by Law No. 521, which came into force on December 31, 1964.

Similar to its status under the 1961 Constitution, the Council of State is included in the "Judiciary" section among the "Higher Courts" in the 1982 Constitution. The duties, structure, functioning, and personnel of the Council of State are regulated by the Council of State Law No. 2575, enacted on January 6, 1982, and still in force today. Although the Council of State performs certain administrative functions, as outlined in Article 24 of the Council of State Law, where it acts as a first-instance court in specific disputes, the vast majority of its workload consists of cases it handles as a cassation authority in administrative judiciary (Eraslan, 2020).

According to the 2023 data from the Ministry of Justice, the number of cases per judge in the Council of State decreased from 889 in 2015 to 518 in 2023. Similarly, the number of cases carried over to the following year steadily declined, from 264,358 in 2016 to 112,827 in 2023. It is noteworthy that the number of new cases filed in the Council of State peaked in 2016, the year of the July 15 coup attempt, reaching 270,463 cases. However, this figure dropped significantly to 87,948 in the following year, a change undoubtedly resulting from the activation of regional administrative courts as appellate bodies in July 2016. Additionally, after the start of the pandemic, the number of new cases filed in 2021 increased by approximately 29,000 compared to the previous year. The number of cases carried over from the previous year in the Council of State also peaked in 2017 before beginning a steady decline. The average time required to resolve a case in the Council of State similarly peaked after July 15, reaching 749 days, but dropped to 377 days by 2023. These data indicate that while the workload of the Council of State has increased during certain periods, there is a general trend toward reduction. In terms of decisions rendered in 2023, the Council of State issued a total of 114,923 decisions as a cassation authority. Approximately 48% of these upheld the appealed decision, while around 9% resulted in reversals. This demonstrates the accuracy of decisions made by regional administrative courts during appellate review, underscoring their overall effectiveness.

According to CEPEJ data, the total number of cases in the Council of State per 100 individuals annually (including newly filed and carried-over cases) is 0.104. This figure is significantly above the median value of approximately 0.04 among Council of Europe member states for this criterion (CEPEJ, 2024b). On the other hand, the proportion of cases pending for more than two years in the Council of State is 28% (CEPEJ, 2024a),

which is considerably higher compared to administrative and regional administrative courts. Regarding this criterion, Türkiye is in a better position than Italy, Albania, and Croatia among Council of Europe member states. However, due to insufficient data provided to the Commission (CEPEJ, 2024a), a comprehensive evaluation of member state rankings is not feasible.

5. Conclusion

The judicial oversight of the acts and actions of public legal entities, which have the power to unilaterally create legal effects through the exercise of public authority, is an indispensable part of the rule of law. The most critical condition for the effective and healthy functioning of the administrative judiciary is to protect fundamental rights and freedoms and act in accordance with the principle of the rule of law in the execution of administrative acts and actions. By doing so, the number of disputes brought to the judiciary will decrease, enabling the administrative judiciary system to operate more efficiently. Indeed, according to data provided by the Ministry of Justice, the average annulment rate in annulment lawsuits filed in the administrative judiciary in Türkiye over the past four years is approximately 29%. This figure highlights that a significant portion of the workload in the administrative judiciary stems from unlawful administrative actions. Therefore, it is evident that both the qualifications of newly appointed public officials and the competence of existing public personnel must be enhanced. Consequently, decision–makers will need to exercise greater diligence in their actions and decisions.

Furthermore, both the legislative body and institutions such as the Ministry of Justice and the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK) must take timely measures to ensure that administrative cases are resolved with minimal expense and as swiftly as possible, as mandated by Article 141 of the Constitution. In this regard, it is crucial that administrative courts established in 2023 and 2024, but not yet operational, commence their activities without delay. Additionally, to alleviate the heavy workload of the Ankara and Gaziantep Regional Administrative Courts, the establishment of new regional administrative courts would be a prudent step. In order to reduce the number of lawsuits, it may also be worth considering making alternative dispute resolution methods more functional for disputes falling under the administrative judiciary. Ensuring that administrative bodies act in compliance with the law without requiring court intervention or resolving disputes between the administration and individuals without resorting to litigation, could significantly reduce the burden on the administrative judiciary. In particular, the introduction of an effective and expedited administrative remedy before

litigation should be prioritized for disputes arising from Law No. 6458, which constitute a significant workload for administrative courts. Furthermore, it is evident that applications to the Ombudsman Institution could also contribute to reducing the number of lawsuits.

The Council of Judges and Prosecutors must fulfill its duties with precision, particularly regarding changes to judicial jurisdictions, specialization, and increasing the number of chambers in courts. This requires meticulous planning and well-founded assessments. In this context, ensuring specialization in the administrative courts of Ankara and Istanbul, as well as providing judges in these courts with geographical tenure, could yield positive outcomes. Such measures would not only facilitate quicker and easier access to justice through administrative courts but also contribute to enhancing the competency of administrative judges. Furthermore, improving the current state of the administrative judiciary in line with the proposed recommendations would undoubtedly play a significant role in advancing Türkiye's adherence to the standards of the rule of law.

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