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A NEW THREAT TO UKRAINE: THE RISE OF EXTREMIST PARTIES IN EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES

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Abstract: *This article closely examines four far-right parties from Western and Eastern European Union Member States, exploring the potential threats they may pose to Ukraine and identifying any similarities or differences in their messages. The study investigates how these parties use specific issues to win over voters and how they adapt their strategies to suit local customs and attitudes. It also highlights the potential risks these parties pose to democratic governance, especially when they obstruct legislative proceedings. The article further delves into the dynamics of these parties' rise to power, particularly in the context of a political landscape dominated by traditional parties and it scrutinizes the influence of public sentiment on the success of these parties and how they capitalize on public discontent.*

Keywords: far-right parties, Ukraine, European Union, discourse, elections.

1. Introduction

Extremist or far-right parties have attracted the attention of researchers over the past two decades due to their swift ascent followed by abrupt downturns and their ability to attract large numbers of voters in a short time. The cyclical nature of their emergence in times of crisis and the damage they can do to a democratic state are of particular interest in the run-up to crucial elections.

These parties, frequently labeled as populist or extremist, capitalize on public unrest and apprehension. They flourish by proposing oversimplified answers to intricate issues and exploiting societal rifts. However, their polarizing language and strategies only exacerbate societal conflicts and undermine the foundations of democratic institutions. The extremist leaders blame the mainstream parties for every negative thing that has happened in the past or

present, portraying their leaders as lazy, thieves or traitors to the people (Schedler, 1996, 291). By doing so, they manage to diminish citizens' trust in the traditional political class and then manage to win over voters more easily. This phenomenon could explain the surge of the extremist parties, especially in times of crisis, when they have many more issues to address.

Currently, the ongoing global crises started in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, then the crisis generated by the Russian Federation invasion in Ukraine and the refugee crisis have managed to provide multiple propaganda topics for extremist parties, topics that could be used in order to gain more power in the context of 2024 elections. In the actual context of the Ukraine war, the rise of these parties raises new dilemmas. As the extremist parties gain power, their discourse and strategies, which are focused on winning voters, may cause people to question Ukraine's future and the support of the Western states. This situation demands attention, especially in the context of this year's European parliamentary elections in the Member States of the European Union.

To this end, this paper aims to delve into the complexities of this issue, exploring the threats these parties may pose to Ukraine's stability and security amidst an ongoing conflict. We will scrutinize the potential future implications of the burgeoning extremist parties in Europe, examining their consensus (or lack thereof) on the situation in Ukraine. To navigate this multifaceted issue, we will employ a populist theoretical framework. This approach will enable us to dissect the rapid ascension of far-right parties, their appeal to specific demographics, and the potential influence they wield on both national and international politics.

In addition to applying the populist theoretical framework we will analyze the evolution of two far-right parties each from two Western and two Eastern European Union Member States and evaluate the potential threats they present to the ongoing backing of the Ukrainian state as it strives for liberation from the Russian Federation. Furthermore, we seek to identify any similarities or differences in the rhetoric of these far-right parties across Eastern and Western Europe. We aim to understand if factors such as geographical proximity to Ukraine and Russia, a history of communism, or developmental challenges have any bearing on the discourse of these parties. In regard to this, we will compare the rhetoric and beliefs of the main extremist parties from two Eastern European countries, namely Romania and Poland and two Western European countries, specifically France and Netherlands, focusing on their ideology, their attitude towards

the European Union and their position towards the war in Ukraine. This comparison will reveal how these parties may impact their respective nations' policies toward Ukraine, the potential effects on Ukraine's geopolitical situation and in the same time how they could influence broader European response to the ongoing conflict.

The four states selected for this study offer a broad spectrum of European political environments, thereby giving a general perspective on the ascension of extremist parties in various settings. These countries have been witnessing substantial political transitions towards far-right parties in recent times so it is relevant to study how they affect the decisions of the leaders of the traditional ruling parties (Nourbakhsh, 2023; Golder, 2023). Furthermore, since February 2022, with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, all four nations have contributed to supporting Ukraine in its fight for territorial integrity, stepping up their financial, diplomatic, political and military efforts. However, the rise to power of extremist parties may affect the support given to the Ukrainian state, which poses a real danger to Ukraine's survival.

2. Theoretical framework

Populism perceives society as being split into two uniform and conflicting factions, namely “the people” and “the elite” (Miscoiu and Pantea, 2023), considering that politics should mirror the collective desire of the peoples (Golder, 2016). To this end, populist parties tend to promote unconventional ways of doing politics that oppose to the conventional ones used by traditional political parties (Miscoiu and Pantea, 2023). By doing this, the populist parties tend to treat political problems by reducing them, sometimes even to absurdity, expecting total yes or no answers, and denying the variables that can arise in complex situations (Golder, 2016). This practice is very harmful when it comes to sensitive political issues because the answer cannot always be simplified to the extent desired by the promoters of populism.

In terms of representing the interests of the people as opposed to the decisions made by the "elite" political class, populism can be inclusionary or exclusionary (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Inclusionary populism advocates for the provision of tangible advantages and civic liberties to be expanded to groups that have been historically marginalized and overlooked, being common among the left-wing parties in Latin America (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). On the other hand, exclusionary populism search to exclude specific groups from being part of “the

people”, thereby restricting their access to these identical privileges and rights. This type of populism is common in the far-right parties in Europe, which are using cultural, religious or ethnic criteria for exclusion of certain groups (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Whichever type of populism is used, both versions exclude certain categories and favor others, which runs counter to the equal representation of the people in “the struggle” with the political elites.

As we shall see, the far-right parties analyzed by us fall into the second category of populism, in which on the basis of certain criteria they promote the exclusion of certain social categories from society. This exclusionary approach often results in these groups being marginalized and denied the same benefits and rights that are available to the rest of the population. This form of populism can have significant implications for social cohesion and equality. Furthermore, populist parties, by fostering a confrontational stance through their leadership, have the potential to shape public opinion and consequently sway the policies of established parties. These attitudes can extend their impact to global decisions, such as influencing the support of member states for Ukraine.

By analyzing the actions of the far-right parties in four European states through the populist framework we could gain a deeper understanding of their strategies, motivations, and impact on the political landscape. Also, by examining the attitude of these far-right parties towards the European Union and Ukraine we could gain a deeper comprehension of the threat they represent in the context of their rapid ascent at both the European and national levels.

3. Party profiles

In this chapter we will focus on the main extremist political parties from Romania, Poland, France and Netherlands by looking at elements such as self-description, political orientation, topics promoted, attitude towards the European Union and position in the conflict in Ukraine. These four case studies will help us determine if there are any differences between the main extremist parties from countries located in the Eastern and Western European Union.

Romania

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) represents the main extreme right party in Romania. Founded in 2019, AUR calls itself a nationalist, conservative, unionist and patriotic party, supporting the traditional family, the free-market economy and the union of Romania with

the Republic of Moldova in order to achieve the Great Romania "within a strong, united and fair Europe" (Statute of the Political Party Alliance for the Union of Romanians, n.d.). Appealing to the nationalist side by promoting an exacerbated patriotism such as "Make Romania Great Again", AUR has managed to attract a considerable percentage of citizens since its formation. Positioning itself in contrast to the perceived corrupt political elite, advocating for its eradication, AUR steps into a realm not sufficiently explored by the other newly emerged parties (moderate in political discourse) and sets itself up as the saviors of Romanians dissatisfied with the direction in which their country is heading. At the same time, the party led by George Simion and Claudiu Tarziu also addresses the population disillusioned with the current political class, adapting recurrent conspiracy theories at a global level and transforming them into local conspiracies to explain the way the classical parties work but also the so-called failure of Romania's development (Coțofană, 2023).

The discourse promoted by the members of this party directed towards the traditional parties, and later, with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, shaped around conspiracy theories, attracted the attention of political scientists who labelled this party as a fascist political movement (Bocancea, 2020) or as populist ultra-conservative (Stoica and Voina, 2023) who is supporting every anti-system movement among Romanian citizens.

Regarding the attitude towards the European Union, AUR is considered to be a Eurosceptic party, creating a negative image of the European Union and its policies which they describe as communist (Stoica and Voina, 2023) by showing themselves as promoters of the anti-communist/anti-EU movement. However, they are not advocating the dissolution of the European Union but only its reform, blaming the bureaucracy and comparing certain policies imposed by the European Union to when Romania was a communist country and the rules were imposed by Kremlin leaders (Griera and Leeson, 2023).

The party's attitude towards Ukraine is a rather negative one, with its leaders spreading fake news about the conflict in Ukraine, the Romanian state's support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees coming to Romania. In the first days of the war, AUR members were promoting Russia's official discourse, spreading fake news that there is no war in Ukraine (Chiruta, 2022) despite all the clear evidence of conflict. The anti-Ukrainian rhetoric of AUR members caught the attention of the public, who were largely pro-Ukraine. Journalists pointed out similarities

between the narratives of AUR members and those promoted by Russia, making the connection to Russia clearer to the public (Chiruta, 2022). AUR leaders continued to maintain their discourse, stating that the war "is not ours" (Dunai, 2023) calling on the politicians in power to stop all support for Ukraine and to rethink the partnership with the European Union and NATO (Dunai, 2023). This speech strengthened the party's already loyal electorate, which is prone to believing in conspiracy theories adapted locally by AUR leaders.

AUR manifested the anti-Ukrainian position also on the Ukrainian grain issue, setting themselves up as the saviors of Romanian farmers, but given their limited influence in decision-making, they failed to stop Romania's commitment to Ukraine.

However, what is dangerous for Romania, the European Union and Ukraine is the fact that in the last three years the number of AUR supporters has increased considerably due to citizens' dissatisfaction with the current political class as well as with the unnatural governing coalition formed by the National Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party. While in the December 2020 parliamentary elections, AUR managed to win 9% of the electoral vote (Preda, 2021), the current polls are showing that Romania's main far-right party ranks third in voter preference with 19.5% at the parliamentary elections in 2024 (INSCOP Research, 2023) and with 18.4% at the European Parliament elections (INSCOP Research, 2024). The results of the electoral polls report a worrying reality for Romania as a far-right party has not managed to capitalize on the political scene in such a way in the last decade.

Poland

The case of Poland is a delicate one given the Polish tradition of nationalist parties that share similar characteristics to those on the far right of the political spectrum. Over the years, the parties that have come to power in Poland have shared a rhetoric of protecting traditional values similar to that of far-right parties (Khmilevska, 2021). This is also reflected in the stance of Poland's current ruling party, Law and Justice, which promotes traditional conservative positions on social and family issues (Fella, 2024), as evidenced by its record of restrictions on abortion, policies perceived as racist towards Middle Eastern refugees, and anti-LGBTQ campaigns.

However, in this article, we will focus on another far-right party who is raising concerns regarding the violence in their speech and who is considered to be a radical right-wing party, namely the Confederation of Freedom and Independence.

Established in 2018 as a political alliance for the 2019 European Parliament election, the Confederation of Freedom and Independence (often simply referred to as the Confederation) later grew into a full-fledged political party opposing to immigration, LGBTQ+ community and advocating for an intensely nationalistic perspective of the state, authoritarian governance and socially conservative values, coupled with a radical economic agenda (Rae, 2019). The founders of the Confederation, Janusz Korwin-Mikke and Grzegorz Braun are well known as extremist, promoting antisemitic opinions and conspiracy theories that denies Holocaust even defend Hitler (Woroncow, 2023). The Confederation members were the most vocal opponents of the measures taken by the Polish Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic, being against vaccination and restrictive preventive measures (Woroncow, 2023).

Having a libertarian vision of the state, the young leaders of the party, Slawomir Mentzen and Krzysztof Bosak, promote a Eurosceptic discourse without, however, bringing into question a possible reform of the European Union. Statements such as "we don't want the Jews, gays, abortion, taxes and the European Union" are common in the speeches of both leaders mentioned before (Kostrzewa and Marczewski, 2023) highlighting the main issues they will "solve" once in power.

Regarding the attitude of the party towards Ukraine and Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Confederation of Freedom and Independence members have criticized the Polish government for providing "excessive" support for Ukraine calling the ruling party as "servants of the Ukrainian people" (Alan-Lee, 2023) because of the large number of Ukrainian refugees to whom the Polish government has offered financial support. In addition to criticizing the Polish government, several politicians in the Confederation are self-declared Putin supporters and even calls him "his excellency" (Woroncow, 2023), implying that the United States is to blame for the conflict in Ukraine by arming Ukraine and provoking the Russian Federation (Alan-Lee, 2023).

Raising an electorate that responds favorably to the opposition against the ruling party and to the discourse against Ukraine propagated by Confederation members, the radical far-right party has succeeded to secure 7.2% of the vote in the 2023 parliamentary elections (Cienski,

2023) and has now managed to rise to 9% in voter preference (Politico, 2024), being ranked fifth in Poland's election rankings. While the Confederation of Freedom and Independence may currently lack sufficient public support to seize power or secure numerous seats in this year's European Parliament elections, the influence it wields over the incumbent government through its propagated discourse is notably significant. For instance, in an attempt by the current government to take over from the Confederation's propaganda themes, relations with Ukraine have been sidelined. This has even led to a cooling-off phase, culminating in the stopping of Ukrainian grain transit through Poland.

France

When it comes to France, the main far-right party is National Rally. The party, originally founded in 1972, has a history of strong, charismatic leadership. It first gained prominence under the stewardship of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who served as its leader from 1972 to 2011 (Ray, 2024). His tenure was marked by controversial policies and a hardline stance on immigration. In 2011, his daughter, Marine Le Pen, took over from her father and spearheaded the party until 2022, marking the most illustrious era in its history.

While the age of this party may place it in the category of traditional French parties, the National Rally identifies itself as still outside the French establishment (Ray, 2024). This is supported by a decades-long history marked by Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and misogyny. These controversial positions have kept the party on the fringes of mainstream politics, despite its longevity. However, when Marine Le Pen assumed leadership of the party in 2011, she strategically distanced herself from the extremist narratives traditionally associated with the National Rally, while continuing to campaign against immigration (especially from Islamic countries) and European Union (Ray, 2024).

The party's perspective on the European Union has evolved since the era of Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership. During his tenure, the National Rally (named the National Front until 2018) advocated for a "Frexit" and rejected any positive aspects of the European Union. While now, after the rule of Marine Le Pen, the National Rally seeks to restructure the European Union in a way that experts describe as being able to paralyze the entire work of the European institutions (Henley and Rankin, 2022). The ultra-nationalist stance of the party, coupled with its hate speech

against immigration and Islamism, could certainly undermine the foundations of the European Union, potentially even seeking to dismantle it.

As for the position of the National Rally to Ukraine it should be noted that this also differs according to party leadership. During the leadership tenures of both Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen, members of the National Rally were accused of maintaining close connections with the Kremlin and funding the party with Russian money. However, the party's current leader, Jordan Bardella, has sought to distance himself from this past by acknowledging what he calls a "collective naivety" about Vladimir Putin's intentions and ambitions (Laubacher, 2023). Moreover Bardella and the MEPs from the National Rally supported the European Union resolution that condemned Russian Federation aggression in Ukraine in March 2022. But this pro-Ukraine stance was extremely short-lived because when it came to voting on financial aid packages for Ukraine, in November 2022, the MEPs from the National Rally abstained from voting (Goury-Laffont, 2024). Besides the leader of the party, other members of National Rally publicly declared the anti-Ukrainian opinion asking the French President Macron to focus on making a peace conference calling him "irresponsible" for sending arms to Ukraine (Goury-Laffont, 2024).

The National Rally is leading in French election polls with 28%, while the next political party has just 24% (Politico, 2024). The prospect of the National Rally rising to power is a plausible scenario that could significantly impact the democratic apparatus in France, impede decision-making processes within the EU, and diminish support for Ukraine.

Netherlands

The Dutch political scene is dominated by the Party for Freedom (VVD), a far-right party with nationalist beliefs founded in 2006. The Party for Freedom, with its distinct characteristics of nativism, authoritarianism, populism, and Euroscepticism (de Jonge and van Kessel, 2023), has positioned itself as a significant force in the political landscape of Netherlands.

The Party for Freedom primarily focuses on issues such as immigration, a subject that has enabled it to maintain its voter base, Islam, the European Union, foreign policy and climate change (France 24, 2023), proposing drastic solutions in order to solve the country's problems. As reported by France 24 (2023), the far-right party's election program proposes a series of measures like implementing a stricter immigration policy, banning Islamic scarves in public

institutions, disallowing Islamic schools, Korans, and mosques, constructing new nuclear power stations and acting in the best interests of the Netherlands and its people.

As regards to the European Union, the main speech promoted by the party leader, Geert Wilders, revolved around the Netherlands' exit from the European Union in a referendum entitled "Nexit", blaming the European Union for the immigration policies (de Gruyter, 2023). However, after Brexit proved that leaving the European Union is not the best alternative, Wilders has changed the discourse choosing to stay in the European Union and, together with other parties sharing the same grievances, to change it from inside (de Gruyter, 2023).

Despite the fact that the Party for Freedom has condemned in 2022 the Russian Federation invasion in Ukraine, the attitude of the members of the party towards Ukraine is not a positive one. Wilders accused the former Dutch government of giving military aid to Ukraine, stating that the Dutch household will pay the price for a war that is not theirs (Chiu, 2023). Recently, the leader of the party, announced that it will oppose further support to Ukraine with weapons and military equipment (Reuters, 2024). Wilders's statement comes at a time when the Netherlands has been one of the primary suppliers of military equipment to Ukraine.

The stance taken by the Party for Freedom's leader is increasingly concerning because the party won parliamentary elections in the Netherlands held in November 2023, winning 24% of the votes. As far as the European elections to be held this year in the Netherlands are concerned, the outlook is not promising. The Party for Freedom ranking first in the electorate's preferences with 33% (Politico, 2024), it will certainly achieve a good result in the European Parliament elections in 2024 and manage to win more seats in the European Parliament.

4. Comparative Analysis

From the above presented analysis, it's evident that all four parties share key traits such as nationalism, Euroscepticism and a stance against immigration, elements that align with the typical characteristics of far-right parties (Golder, 2016) and also integrate into the exclusionary branch of populism. However, we note that the Alliance for the Union of Romanians and the Confederation for Freedom and Independence are relatively new parties, formed in the last 8 years, unlike the National Rally or the Party for Freedom, which have been part of the political scene in France and the Netherlands for much longer.

While the far-right parties in France and the Netherlands have gradually developed their narratives and accumulated supporters over time by addressing various significant societal issues, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians has experienced a rapid ascent, successfully garnering a substantial supporter base in a remarkably short period taking advantage of the existing separation between the political and social classes and maximizing their electoral gains by setting themselves up as the true representatives of the citizens. In the case of Poland, we can see that the Confederation for Freedom and Independence did not achieve such a rapid rise, which can be explained by the existence of several parties that identify with the characteristics of the extreme right. An example in this case would be the Law and Justice party, which in one form or another has been at the center of Warsaw politics for the last 20 years. Yet the fact that all these parties have managed to rise in the polls in recent years shows a general dissatisfaction of citizens with the traditional political parties and their policies. Still, this dissatisfaction is reflected to a greater extent in Western European countries than in Eastern Europe. The Party for Freedom has emerged victorious in the internal elections and the National Rally is currently leading in the election polls while in Romania, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians is only third in the election rankings after the two traditional parties and the Confederation for Freedom and Independence is only fifth.

Although Euroscepticism is a common theme for all four parties, their proposed solutions differ. The National Rally and the Party for Freedom initially proposed the exit of states from the European Union and its dissolution, but after Brexit they moderated their discourse to propose EU reform. In the case of Romania, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians has consistently pushed for reforming European institutions, acknowledging citizens support for EU membership. In contrast, the Confederation for Freedom and Independence maintains its Eurosceptic discourse by calling for Poland's exit from the European Union and promoting a negative image of the European institutions. This divergence from other far-right parties underscores not only the radicalism of the Confederation's members but also the dissatisfaction of a significant percentage of Polish citizens towards the European Union.

Concerning the attitude towards Ukraine, we can see similarities in opposition to support with money, weapons, or military equipment. Both the Alliance for the Union of Romanians and the Party for Freedom in Netherlands adopted a speech focused on the costs citizens will bear

for the war in Ukraine, creating an image of distancing from Ukraine through phrases such as "the war is not ours" (Dunai, 2023) or "the household will pay the price for a war that is not theirs" (Chiu, 2023). On the other side, the Confederation and the National Rally have expressed their strong disapproval of the measures taken by local politicians to support Ukraine, calling them "irresponsible" for sending arms to Ukraine (Goury-Laffont, 2024) or "servants of the Ukrainian people" (Alan-Lee, 2023).

5. Conclusions

Our analysis of the main right-wing parties in Romania, Poland, France and the Netherlands revealed a common base of issues addressed with the aim of winning voters. Whether we are talking about hostile attitudes towards the European Union and immigrants or exaggerated nationalism, all the parties mentioned are trying to take advantage of these themes to gain power. However, the way these parties operate is tailored not only to local customs but also to citizens' attitudes sowing a certain flexibility of the far-right parties.

As with traditional parties, the rise of a party in a political space where there are other parties sharing the same ideology is extremely difficult. We see this in the case of the Confederation, which is not enjoying as strong a rise as the other three parties mentioned. The rise of these parties and their accession to power in some countries may also lead to the gaining of a significant number of seats in the European Parliament. In this scenario, a possible alliance of far-right parties in the European Parliament could block the legislative process and initiate procedures to reform or restructure the European Union. However, we must also take into account the co-decision process at the level of the European Union which can prevent attempts to damage the European Union's ability to function. At the same time, we have to look at previous MEP mandates held by far-right parties, which, although they have raised certain difficulties in cases such as the vote on aid packages for Ukraine or the vote on sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, have not had the power to block the legislative process or to initiate proposals that would harm the entire European Union.

The negative attitude towards Ukraine, it could have two possible explanations. The first explanation may be that these parties want to win over voters who do not support Ukraine or who are undecided on the issue by taking on the role of opponents of support measures for

Ukraine. For the second explanation, we have to take into account the alleged connections of some members of these parties with the Russian Federation. There is a possibility that the anti-Ukraine discourse is simply an alignment with Kremlin-coordinated propaganda. In this way, by opposing Ukraine, members of these parties can gain funding and voters.

Whatever the reasons behind the opposition to Ukraine we can see how dangerous they could be in the context of the war initiated by the Russian Federation. A clear demonstration of the potential risks that far-right parties pose to Ukraine can be seen in Poland. Here, the winning party in the October 2023 elections, Law and Justice, sought to attract the Confederation for Justice and Liberty's voters by embracing some of their propagandistic narratives which subsequently led to a deterioration in relations with Ukraine.

Regarding the commonalities or disparities between the four parties we can point out that they promote the same issues that fit the typologies of far-right parties. Elements such as the state to which they belong, their proximity to Ukraine and the Russian Federation and their communist past are not criteria for differentiation. The main elements to be taken into account when differentiating between these parties are the political configuration in their countries and the attitude of citizens towards the issues that are the focus of extremist propaganda. If the political scene is dominated by traditional parties, as in France, the Netherlands or Romania, then extremist parties will have a chance to rise sharply in the polls on the back of public discontent. However, if the political scene is divided between several parties promoting a harsh, extremist discourse, as in the case of Poland, then newly established parties will find it hard to gain ground. On the other hand, the attitude of citizens towards certain issues is extremely important and also has the capacity to differentiate these parties. If in Romania a good part of the citizens supports the country's membership in the European Union, then the discourse of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians will also have a moderate discourse towards the European Union, a reformist discourse. However, if these parties identify a lack of interest among citizens in other topics or even a saturation, they will tend to promote those topics, as in the case of the Netherlands, where the Party for Freedom is vehemently opposed to supporting Ukraine.

Whatever the issues promoted, the fact that these far-right parties turn any mainstream issue into a fight against the mainstream parties, even blocking the legislative process in some

places, is a danger to democracies. Public support for such parties is even more worrying, and could set a dangerous trend for future generations of politicians.

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