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CRAFTING A U.S. RESPONSE TO AN EASTERN EUROPE IN TURMOIL

INTRODUCTION

Every dozen years or so, Eastern Europe seems about to boil over as countries try to free themselves of the Soviet yoke. Twenty years ago this month, Soviet troops had to invade Czechoslovakia to crush such an effort. Twelve years before that, Hungarian Freedom Fighters took to the streets to battle Russian tanks. And twelve years after the Prague Spring of 1968, Poland's Solidarity trade union movement mobilized Poles and captured the world's hearts.

Once again, somewhat truncating the dozen-year cycle, Eastern Europe is boiling again in what may be the most serious crisis in the history of the Soviet East European empire. The current strikes by Polish workers in support of the Solidarity independent labor union, for example, may presage serious unrest. Profound convulsions can be expected to shatter the Soviet-backed regimes in that region. Stalinist methods of repression in Eastern Europe have long since exhausted their political effectiveness. The once accepted social contract that had guaranteed the perpetuation of the communist parties' hold on those societies is now openly questioned by increasingly bold independent political forces. Discontent is all-embracing, the ruling circles are unable to offer valid solutions to urgent social and economic problems, and intellectual unrest has become endemic.[1]

Evidence of the unrest abounds.

In Poland: A spontaneous strike in April 1988, provoked by drastic price increases, started in the Nowa Huta steel foundry near Cracow, Poland's largest industrial complex. The strike expanded to other industrial centers, including the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, the birthplace of Solidarity. Among other demands, the workers asked for better wages and the legalization of the banned trade union. These demands have been sounded anew this

1 This analysis deals only with the East European countries belonging to the Warsaw Treaty Organization, which excludes Yugoslavia and Albania.

August by coal miners in Upper Silesia. At labor leader Lech Walesa's urging, shipyard workers from the Baltic Coast joined the strike on August 22, 1988.

In Romania: Thousands of workers from the industrial city of Brasov demonstrated in November 1987 against Nicolae Ceausescu's personal dictatorship and his regime's harsh austerity policies.

In Czechoslovakia: Members of the dissident group Charter 77 issued an appeal in January 1988 for a "comprehensive revolutionary change" in all social areas, the political rehabilitation of about 500,000 people expelled from the Communist Party after August 1968, and democratic rights for all citizens. The following month, hundreds of thousands of Czech and Slovak believers signed a petition demanding more freedom of religion. One month later, in an unprecedented display of activism, thousands of protesters demanding religious freedom gathered outside the palace of the Roman Catholic Primate in Prague.

In Hungary: An estimated 10;000 Hungarians marched through Budapest on March 15, 1988, in the biggest anti-government demonstration since the 1956 Revolution. The participants chanted slogans and carried banners demanding freedom of the press, real reforms, freedom of assembly, and real elections. Addressing the crowd, dissident philosopher Gaspar Miklos Tamas called for "a new Constitution and new elections to bring about a modern Hungarian democracy." This spring, meanwhile, the first Hungarian independent trade union was founded by a group of scientific workers in Budapest.

In East Germany: Hundreds of East German independent peace and human rights activists demonstrated in January 1988 for democratization.

For a long time, the bitter memory of the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 haunted the East European collective mind. It seemed that an overall rejection of the system and the construction of democratic institutions had become pipedreams. The same was true for the attempts to "humanize" the system from within. But this concealed deep-seated frustrations and long-repressed aspirations for change. At the beginning of the 1980s, not only in the USSR, but also in Eastern Europe, the evidence of economic decline and political stagnation had become unavoidable even for the *nomenklatura* (political and economic elite). Splits in the communist ruling groups have emerged between partisans and enemies of change. More than ever, East European Politburos are divided by factious rivalries.

Maturing Political Opposition. As for the ruled, their discontent with the current situation has led to widespread apathy, moral frustration, intellectual despair, frantic consumerism, and the development of alternative subcultures whose values challenge the existing order. The meaning of this: the governed do not accept the existing artificial order. As a result, political opposition has reached an impressive maturity and sophistication. Eastern Europe seems to be entering a classical revolutionary situation, described by the Soviet communist theorist Vladimir Lenin as "those down below do not

desire to go on in the old way and those up above are unable to."[2] Simple tinkering with the system cannot work any more.

A rebellion is likely in the near future and probably will transcend national boundaries. The explosion may break out simultaneously in Hungary and Poland and then expand to Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Such a development would confront the Soviet leadership with the most serious challenge ever to its hegemony over Eastern Europe and might expedite the dissolution of the Soviet empire.

The United States goal must be national self-determination and democracy for the peoples of Eastern Europe. The pursuit of this goal requires three policies:

♦♦ Assistance to the emergent democratic and national opposition through public diplomacy and overt and covert material aid.

♦♦ Consistent application of economic and political leverage to reward domestic liberalization and punish the resurgence of Stalinism.

♦♦ Efforts to add to the Soviet Union's political and economic costs for dominating Eastern Europe by making Moscow's granting independence to the region the key condition for better U.S.-Soviet relations and economic cooperation.

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE

Mikhail Gorbachev's election as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985 ignited a chain reaction of major transformations in the whole Soviet bloc. The "Gorbachev effect" has altered dramatically the traditional political equation in Eastern Europe. East European leaders derive their legitimacy from the Marxist-Leninist ideology and their special relationship to the Soviet Union. From the very beginning, they were irritated and worried by Gorbachev's radical rhetoric. Soon after coming to power, he informed Warsaw Pact leaders that he was not ready to indulge the easy-going rhythm of the Brezhnev times. What was needed, he said, was dynamism, effectiveness, boldness, creative imagination in dealing with increasingly difficult social and economic issues. The Soviet Union, he added, cannot afford to bear on its shoulders the burden of ailing East European economies.

With Gorbachev engaged in reforms at home, East European communist elites are faced with difficult options: they can follow his injunctions for major changes, risk letting the genie of social rebellion out of the bottle, and thus lose their power, or they can pay lip service to the new Moscow line, procrastinate, and hope that Gorbachev falls victim to a plot similar to the October 1964 palace coup that toppled Nikita Khrushchev. So far, most East European rulers seem reluctant to walk in Gorbachev's footsteps and engage in devastating criticism of the past because this would amount to self-flagellation and, eventually, their political demise.

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2 Vladimir Lenin, "The Symptoms of a Revolutionary Situation," in Robert C. Tucker, *The Lenin Anthology* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1975), p. 275.

Socioeconomic Crisis

All the elements that define a social crisis exist now in Eastern Europe. The ruling Communist Parties, though still controlling all the levers of power, are amorphous bureaucratic organisms. Their record is one of economic mismanagement, opposition to thoroughgoing reforms, intolerance of criticism and dissent, dogmatic approaches to theoretical issues, and subservient behavior toward the Soviet Union.

As the trade-off for public passivity, the regimes pledged to guarantee job security and other social advantages to the population. But East European economies, with the possible exception of the East German, are a shambles. Instead of increased consumption, communist regimes are compelled to pursue a draconian austerity. Waiting long, infuriating hours in line for elementary foodstuffs is the daily experience for Romanians, Bulgarians, or Poles. Meat and cheese have become luxury products in countries with rich agricultural traditions. All economic indicators suggest that this situation can only worsen. Without economic reforms, the already alarming foreign debt, totalling $92.7 billion in 1987, will grow.[3]

Opposition to Political Pluralism

The programs advanced by the current East European leaders fail even to tackle the issue of political pluralization. At the most, some of them, like Bulgarian General Todor Zhivkov and the Polish Prime Minister and General Secretary Wojciech Jaruzelski, have tried to appropriate the language of Gorbachev's *glasnost'* while downplaying its content. Other leaders, like Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu and East German General Secretary Erich Honecker, have not concealed their displeasure with Gorbachev's calls for democratization. East European leaders are aware of the contagion of the pluralistic virus and the likelihood East European demands for reforms quickly would outrun the Soviet margin of tolerance.

To dampen any rise in expectations, the local elites have decided to tighten their grip and organize systematic campaigns against the opposition. In Hungary, for example, the apartments of members of the democratic opposition are searched, their passports are withheld, and they are often beaten by the police. This March, Miklos Haraszti, a prominent Hungarian dissident writer, was detained by the police to prevent his participation in a mass demonstration.

Growing Worker Discontent in Poland

As the new round of Polish workers' strikes has shown, Jaruzelski's half-hearted reforms have failed to buy social peace. If the government refuses to legalize Solidarity, the unrest may explode on a massive scale. If the Soviet Union decides not to intervene militarily to quell a Polish rebellion, Jaruzelski will have to find internal resources to solve the crisis. A compromise is, as opposition activist and writer Adam Michnik puts it, both essential and impossible. The regime would be soon confronted with new outbursts of social discontent.

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3 East European Statistics Service (Brussels), No. 144, April 8, 1988, p. 10.

Unofficial groups like "Peace and Freedom," founded in 1985, would erode further the underpinnings of the closed society.

Under unremitting pressure from below, the regime probably would yield a number of new concessions in human and economic rights. Indeed, for the first time in a communist country, Poland stopped jailing conscientious objectors this July and instead made them perform "alternative service." Independent unions would eventually reemerge and have a decisive word in formulating social and economic policy.

The Struggle for Leadership in Hungary

The Hungarian Communist Party's conference this May sanctioned the removal of 75-year-old leader Janos Kadar as general secretary and replaced him with seasoned *apparatchik* Karoly Grosz. Although the new Politburo includes two leading advocates of reforms (Rezso Nyers and Imre Pozsgay), a June crackdown on dissent suggests that Grosz and his colleagues do not intend to loosen the Communist Party's grip on total power or to tolerate political pluralism. At the same time, during his July 1988 visit to the U.S., Grosz exhibited some important doctrinal flexibility, admitting, for example, that "in principle" socialism is not "incompatible" with a multiparty system.

The struggle will continue within the top Hungarian leadership between partisans of democratization and proponents of limited reforms. This dynamic might lead gradually to a new political structure that includes the formation of an opposition socialist party. Indeed, new political organizations have emerged like the Hungarian Democratic Forum, founded by intellectuals close to the reform-minded Politburo member Imre Pozsgay. And a loose structure, known as the free initiative network, has been created to facilitate contacts between independent groups. Calls for pluralism have become increasingly intense in Hungary.

The conflict between the centrist Grosz and the liberals is likely to deepen in the near future as Soviet reforms raise the expectations of Hungarian social activists. Commenting on the results of the national conference of his party, Pozsgay unequivocally deplored the use of "administrative" (read: police) measures against opposition figures. He advocated gradual institutional reforms to guarantee the rights of all minorities, including dissidents, and admitted that, without freedom, Hungary cannot bridge the gap with the more advanced part of Europe. In June, he was appointed a state minister and may soon replace Grosz as Hungarian prime minister. Such a promotion would improve enormously the prospects for accelerating Hungary's political democratization.

Hungary's communist elite, meanwhile, is confused and incompetent. The opposition is expected to push its demands in a prudent manner, yet not back down if pressured by the authorities. With the deteriorating economic situation, Hungary's recently created first independent union is sure to expand its working class base. In this situation, the post-Kadar leadership may accept a redistribution of political power rather than crack down on independent groups and exacerbate the crisis. In the long run, the Hungarian opposition may broaden its agenda to insist on the withdrawal of Soviet troops and a proclamation of Hungary's neutrality.

Romania after Ceausescu

In no East European country is the issue of succession as urgent and uncertain as in Romania. Nicolae Ceausescu has carried the neo-Stalinist model of personal leadership to an extreme. He has elevated his wife Elena and other members of his family to top party and government positions. His youngest son Nicu is being groomed to inherit his father's mantle.

To pay his country's $13 billion foreign debt, Ceausescu has imposed terrible hardships on Romanians. As a result, their living standard has plunged to the lowest in Europe. *Glasnost'*, meanwhile, is forbidden in Bucharest, where the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* and the *glasnost'*-oriented Soviet magazine *Ogonyok* are treated as subversive manifestos.

Though the presidential clan is ensconced in strategically important jobs, the emergence of an anti-Ceausescu coalition within the party and the security police cannot be dismissed. Its success depends on further working class unrest in Romania and Moscow's increased interest in being rid of the embarrassing Romanian leader. The least likely script is for Ceausescu to ensure dynastic succession. His departure would be widely hailed by Romanians. Yet if his dictatorship manages to hang on to power, a major political explosion is likely. To prevent anarchic developments, influential members of the party and state bureaucracy would try to oust the incumbent dictator and adopt a more realistic economic policy. Without political reforms, however, this would be only a temporary hiatus of the Romanian crisis.

The East German Response to *Glasnost'*

As Romania's Ceausescu, the East German leader Erich Honecker has not concealed his reservations about Gorbachev's reforms. As long as the economic situation in the German Democratic Republic remains the least critical in the Soviet bloc, East German leaders can resist Soviet pressure for changes. Still, Honecker's technocratic socialism has created widespread discontent among the country's youth and intellectuals. Even Party members consider the old leader out of step with the changing times and look forward to his eventual departure. For the time being, the East German leaders reiterate their dogmatic views of socialism and consistently censor Gorbachev's anti-bureaucratic pronouncements.

In a speech this February, Honecker admitted that certain reforms are necessary, but he merely suggested strengthening labor discipline and better selection of economic managers. He then warned sternly against any flirtation with "anti-Marxist, anti-socialist bourgeois ideology." The Soviet anti-Stalinist film "Repentance," meanwhile, has been severely criticized by East German media. Ironically, therefore, *glasnost'* and *perestroika* have become the main slogans of the East German independent peace and human rights groups. Opposition to Honecker's ossified regime will mount if the infectious effect of Gorbachev's ideas spreads and the economic situation worsens. With any decline in East German living standards, working class activism is likely to gather momentum. The moral support of the East German Evangelical Church and the underground cultural dissent could turn these peace and human rights movements into genuine political opposition, which could mean a split in the East German elite into reformers and conservatives. The prospects for

party-induced liberalization, however, are bleak because the regime still maintains rigid control over the society and the opposition groups, though active, are therefore isolated.

Czechoslovakia Twenty Years After

Gustav Husak, whose name had become synonymous with the "normalization" of the Czechoslovakian political life after the 1968 crushing of the Prague Spring, was replaced as Communist Party leader last December. His successor, Milos Jakes, is no liberal reformer but heads a centrist faction in the top party hierarchy. Other political groupings include so-called moderate reformists, headed by Prime Minister Lubomir Strougal, and the conservatives, whose main spokesmen are Politburo members Alois Indra and Vasil Bilak. Emboldened by Gorbachev's reforms, Strougal and his supporters advocate economic modernization which also would include limited political relaxation. Obviously, no faction within the Czechoslovak top party elite is eager to resume the Prague Spring's experiment of "socialism with a human face." Yet reforms will lead Czechoslovak party leaders to the recognition that the goals proclaimed by Gorbachev are strikingly similar to those of the Prague Spring reformers.

Since Milos Jakes surely is not going to reform the Czechoslovak economic and political system, the Soviets may try to bring to power a political group unencumbered by any connection to the suppression of the 1968 reform movement. Indeed, a litmus test for Gorbachev's determination to fill in blank spots in the history of Soviet-East European relations will be a reconsideration of events in 1968. Such a step, which now seems possible, would delegitimize the current Czechoslovak leadership and allow a reformist team to come to power.

Moscow's Special Relationship with Bulgaria

For three decades, the 76-year-old Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov has been Moscow's most ardent supporter within the Warsaw Pact. After an initially cool relationship with Gorbachev, he managed to convince the Soviets of his intention to pursue full-fledged *perestroika*. Zhivkov then evinced such reformist zeal that the Kremlin had to calm him down. In the post-Zhivkov era, Bulgaria will maintain its historic special relationship with Moscow that is rooted in Russia's liberating Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Groups are sure to emerge outside of the Party, interested in broad political reform, environmental protection, and cultural diversity. To counter too rapid liberalization, the Communist Party could resort to nationalist diversions, including new anti-Yugoslav campaigns and further harassment of Bulgaria's Turkish minority.

KEY FACTORS IN THE NEW OPPOSITION

Revival of Civil Society in Eastern Europe

Gorbachev's reforms take place in a world totally different from that of Nikita Khrushchev. In the aftermath of Solidarity, for example, the opposition in Eastern Europe has ceased being a marginal, albeit heroic, force. It has grass-roots structures and internationally coordinated initiatives. The opposition culture has generated its own values,

ideas, and methods of political resistance to totalitarian techniques of manipulation. Spontaneous communities have emerged where people can freely express their views. Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) in Poland, the Democratic Opposition in Hungary, and the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights in East Germany have helped crystallize the nuclei of social autonomy.

The reconstitution of the East European civil society is a development of historical significance. Alternative structures of social communication now exist that, over time, can dislodge the Communist Party's monopoly of power. Using nonviolent methods, these structures defy the official ideology and promote guidelines for living in truth and dignity. Parallel political and social structures thus have developed that will determine the future of Central European societies as much as will the strife at the top of Communist Party leadership.

Cross-National Communication by Opposition Movements

In recent years, the emergence in Eastern Europe of a new internationalism of shared values and common aspirations for emancipation has resulted in joint action by human rights movements from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland. These groups organize international seminars, issue statements on significant political topics, and criticize their governments' dismal human rights record. Activists in the region are considering issuing a common platform of social and political reforms to achieve pluralism and freedom.

Dissidents from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland on October 23, 1986, issued a proclamation of their determination to struggle for political democracy, independence, pluralism, self-government, the peaceful unification of a divided Europe and its democratic integration, and the rights of all national minorities.[4] The following month, hundreds of activists from Eastern and Western Europe published the Memorandum "Giving Real Life to the Helsinki Accords." In it, they proclaimed their belief that peace and human rights are indivisible and that true detente cannot be achieved without establishing direct, informal relations between citizens from countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

In summer 1987, Polish and Czechoslovak dissidents created a joint committee to exchange information and coordinate their activities. Last February, demonstrations of solidarity were organized in Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw to protest Ceausescu's repression of Romanians. Communist authorities are increasingly worried by the development of this international opposition movement.

Engaged in pursuing his own reformist agenda, Gorbachev seems inclined to reconsider what long has been the Kremlin's inflexible East European policy. Yet he has made clear that the Soviet Union will encourage only those reforms controlled by Communist Parties. This means, it appears, that the Kremlin will not tolerate the legalization of opposition political parties in Eastern Europe. Thus while the Soviets surely do not want to move

4 See "Joint Communique signed by Hungarian, Polish, Czech and East German dissidents adopted October 23, 1986," *Le Monde* (Paris), October 29, 1986.

militarily against Eastern Europe once again, it is unlikely that they would watch passively the dissolution of their East European empire.

HOW SHOULD THE U.S. RESPOND?

The U.S. should make public its interests in Eastern Europe. The U.S. policy of hands off Eastern Europe has not worked. In its place, Washington should develop a set of measures to increase its role in the region. The U.S. should:

1) Refine the policy of differentiation. Since the late 1960s, the U.S. has had a policy of "differentiation" in dealing with Eastern Europe, meaning a distinct policy for each nation. The most-favored-nation trade status with the U.S., for example, has been used to reward political relaxation and a more tolerant human rights policy in Eastern Europe. Differentiation now should be refined. Not only should the U.S. encourage regimes that have shown interest in economic reforms, it should also prompt those governments to engage in political changes and allow free expression of dissent. For example, when the Hungarian regime resorts to violent means to suppress domestic opposition, this fact should not go unnoticed in U.S. bilateral relations with Hungary.

2) Prepare a major statement by either the President or the Vice President, such as George Bush's September 21, 1983, speech in Vienna, to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to independent and democratic development in Eastern Europe. The statement should be an unambiguous U.S. denial of the region's status as a Soviet "sphere of influence."

3) Advise Moscow that Soviet intervention to suppress democratization in any East European country would end prospects for improved U.S.-Soviet relations and could result in political and economic sanctions against the USSR.

4) Emphasize U.S. solidarity with independent peace and human rights movements in the region. If East European governments want to be trusted, they must end the harassment of their internal critics. The U.S. should voice its intent not to limit its dialogue to communist rulers but to expand it to independent groups and individuals. The U.S. should be perceived as a source of active support by the opposition groups in those countries. Private groups and organizations in the U.S. should be encouraged to develop extensive contacts with independent groups and personalities in Eastern Europe.

5) Use such economic incentives as financial and technological assistance and loans to encourage communist regimes to liberalize. The U.S. should grant most-favored-nation trade status only to those countries that relax political controls, ease repression, and allow increased emigration. If this occurs in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, they should be exempted from the Jackson-Vanik and Stevenson amendments, which deny most-favored-nation status to countries grossly violating human rights. At the same time, the Jackson-Vanik and Stevenson amendments should continue to be applied whenever there is no progress in human rights.

6) Develop cultural exchanges at the individual, as well as the state-to-state, level. The U.S. should offer increased and diversified programs of scholarships and fellowships

directly to East European and Soviet students and professors. U.S. libraries should open branches in all East European major cities.

7) Intensify U.S. broadcasting to Eastern Europe through the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Television broadcasting to some East European countries is possible from Austria and West Germany.

8) Promote the concept of a "Central Europe" to include Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and Romania. This would make the historic distinction from East Europe which for centuries meant Russia and its expansionist ambitions. The idea of Central Europe evokes the possibility of a confederation of neutral states in the very heart of Europe. This would recognize the pre-1945 truth that culturally, politically, and economically Central Europeans differ markedly from Russians and others in the Soviet "republics."

The U.S. also should target policies toward each country in the region:

1) Poland. Further U.S. economic assistance should depend upon whether party and government head Jaruzelski respects the human rights of the Polish people. Through the National Endowment for Democracy and other nongovernment organizations, the U.S. should fund such unofficial activities in Poland as underground publications, independent radio broadcasting, and autonomous peace and ecological initiatives.

2) Hungary. U.S. contacts should be maintained and developed with all sectors of the opposition. New reforms should be judged by how far they advance political democratization. United States Information Agency grants should bring dissidents to the U.S. to address American policy and opinion makers.

3) Romania. The U.S. should continue to condemn the Ceausescu regime's repressive policies. Ceausescu's rivals within the Communist Party and the beleaguered Romanian dissidents need these encouraging signals from Washington. At the same time, new waves of repression by Ceausescu should trigger new economic sanctions. Contacts should be developed with the few Romanian dissidents. The National Endowment for Democracy should expand its support of independent Romanian publications.

4) Czechoslovakia. The U.S. should use diplomatic channels and public diplomacy to express its interest in the resumption of the reform process. Relations with members of the dissident and opposition groups should be strengthened. NED funds should be increased for the development of new unofficial associations and publications.

5) East Germany. Contacts should be established with independent peace and human rights groups. Taking into account West Germany's strategic, political and cultural interests in East German affairs, Washington should cooperate with Bonn in pursuing its human rights agenda in East Germany.

6) Bulgaria. The U.S. should demand cessation of Bulgarian jamming of Radio Free Europe as a condition for expansion of cultural and scientific exchanges and fellowship programs.

CONCLUSION

Current political, social, and economic unrest in Eastern Europe is likely to intensify. Unlike the past when quick, if bloody, Soviet responses ended similar situations, Moscow and its East European client regimes appear to be running out of solutions. U.S. policy should exploit this situation to bring freedom and national self-determination in Eastern Europe.

Under Gorbachev no less than under his predecessors, the Soviet treatment of Eastern Europe is inspired by imperial considerations. The Kremlin will allow reformism to develop in Eastern Europe only in so far as it does not endanger the current geopolitical situation. But new political forces have emerged in Eastern Europe which refuse to accept the old rules of the game. They boldly question the communist elites' historical credentials and proclaim the right of society to organize itself as independent, free, and self-governing. These ideas are similar to those of the American Revolution. This new situation calls for the U.S. to pursue an active and dynamic policy toward the countries of Eastern Europe.

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