



ORIGINAL PAPER

Post-Communist Transformation(s): A Comparative Analysis between Romania, Poland and Hungary

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Abstract :

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 marked the beginning of a new era for the countries in the region. Romania, Poland, and Hungary are the three Eastern European countries that have undergone significant transformations since the fall of communism in 1989. The post-communist period in Romania was characterized by political instability, economic hardship, and social tension. The transition from a communist system to a democratic one was a complex and challenging process that required significant political, economic, and social changes. The experiences of these countries highlight the importance of civil society, active opposition, and a commitment to economic reform and privatization in achieving a successful post-communist transformation. While the transition to democracy and a market economy is a complex and challenging process, it is essential to address a plethora of intricate challenges in order to establish a stable democracy and achieve sustained economic growth. This paper compares the post-communist transformation in Romania to that of Poland and Hungary from a political, economic, and social perspective.

Keywords: *Romania, Poland, Hungary, politics, economy, society.*

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Introduction

Romania, Poland, and Hungary are three former Eastern Bloc countries that underwent significant post-communist transformations after the fall of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While these three countries share similar historical and cultural backgrounds, the transition from a centralized, planned economy to a democratic, market-oriented system was a complex process, and the outcomes have been different in each country. In this paper, we will examine Romania's post-communist transformation and compare it to that of Poland and Hungary from a political, economic, and social perspective, exploring the factors that have influenced the process and the outcomes. Romania was one of the Soviet Union's satellite states, and its political and economic system was modelled after the Soviet Union's. After Nicolae Ceaușescu's fall in 1989, Romania underwent a rapid transition to a democratic system. However, the transition was accompanied by political and economic instability, hyperinflation, and social unrest. Poland and Hungary also had communist governments, but their transitions were less tumultuous. Poland's Solidarity movement was a driving force in the country's transition, while Hungary's ruling communist party initiated political and economic reforms before the fall of the Soviet Union.

Our trifold analysis encompassing society, economics and politics shall begin with a revelatory and succinct demographic examination. After the fall of communism, Poland had a population of around 38 million people. Its current population stands at an almost identical 30 million in spite of certain migratory patterns. Following the same pattern of affiliation, Hungary has maintained an almost identical demographic stability circling around 10.3 million people. Problems emerge when we are faced with task of analysing Romania's huge demographic decline. In 1989, Romania had a population of 23 million people living within its borders. Contemporary Romania, however, only has a number of around 19 million registered citizens with only 16 million estimated to be living within its own borders. This entails a dramatic net 31% decrease in the total number of people living within Romania and contributing to its society and economic system. Based on this short analysis alone, we can conclude Romania as being dead last compared to Poland and Hungary who have managed to maintain a robust sense of demographic stability after the fall of communism. The numbers demonstrate the country's severe inadaptation to a new system of functionality, thus, creating an inauspicious environment for individuals seeking to work, live, or start a family (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023).

Political Analysis

The post-communist period in Romania was marked by political instability, with the country experiencing multiple changes in government and a failure to establish a stable democracy. According to Vintila Mihailescu, a renowned Romanian sociologist, "Romania is a country that has lost two decades in the transition to democracy" (Mihailescu, 2010:1305). The political class in Romania was corrupt, and political power was concentrated in the hands of a few elites. The transition from a centralized, one-party system to a pluralistic democracy was not smooth. The country has experienced corruption, political gridlock, and a lack of accountability in its democratic institutions. Despite the EU membership in 2007, Romania continues to face political and economic challenges. The country's political system is characterized by weak

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institutions, corruption, and a lack of political will to implement reforms. As a result, Romania has consistently been classified as one of the most corrupt countries in Europe, according to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2023), ranking 44th out of 180 countries, behind Poland (48th) and Hungary (69th). The country also faces significant economic challenges, including low GDP per capita and high levels of poverty and inequality.

In contrast, Poland and Hungary were able to establish stable democracies and political systems relatively quickly after the fall of communism. Poland was able to establish a stable democracy due to the presence of a strong civil society, a vibrant media, and an active opposition. As Jan Zielonka, a political scientist, notes, "Poland's transition was characterized by a vibrant civil society and an active opposition that helped to create a pluralistic political system" (Zielonka, 2015:136). Poland's economic growth has been driven by pro-market reforms, which have attracted foreign investment and promoted entrepreneurship. The country's strong civil society, independent media, and political culture have also played a critical role in shaping the country's political transformation. However, recent developments, such as the government's attempts to restrict judicial independence and media freedom, have raised concerns about the state of democracy in Poland. Similarly, Hungary was able to establish a stable democracy due to the presence of a strong opposition and a civil society that actively participated in the political process. Hungary's political transformation has been marked by a concentration of power in the hands of Prime Minister Viktor Orban's ruling Fidesz party. The country's media and judiciary have been subject to political interference, and civil society has been weakened. Hungary has been criticized by the European Union and human rights groups for its democratic backsliding.

Noam Chomsky, a prominent political commentator, has argued that "The general population doesn't know what's happening, and it doesn't even know that it doesn't know" (Chomsky, 2013:78), making reference to the limited knowledge and understanding of the general population and the role of a specialized class and institutions in managing the affairs of society and shaping people's perceptions and beliefs. Hence, Chomsky conveys the importance of informed citizenship and the role of the media in providing accurate information to the public. In Romania, the media is often controlled by political and economic interests, which limit the availability of independent and accurate information to the public. This lack of information makes it difficult for citizens to hold their elected representatives accountable and participate fully in the democratic process.

Chomsky has also criticized the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, arguing that the concentration of wealth and power is a problem not just for democracy but for the health of society, the economy, and the planet (Chomsky, 2017), placing importance on addressing the concentration of wealth and power in the political and economic systems of these countries. In Romania, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few has contributed to corruption, economic inequality, and political instability.

The differences in the post-communist transformations of Romania, Poland, and Hungary have been complex and varied, reflecting the unique challenges and opportunities facing each country, and can be attributed to a range of factors, including their political leadership and histories, economic policies, and global factors such as EU membership.

One of the key factors that have influenced the post-communist transformation in each country is the legacy of their communist past. For example, in Romania, the Ceausescu regime was marked by widespread corruption, political repression, and economic mismanagement, which has continued to shape the country's political landscape in the post-communist era. In contrast, Poland's Solidarity movement was at the forefront of the struggle against communism, and the country's post-communist transformation was shaped by a strong sense of civic engagement and democratic activism. Equally, in Hungary, the opposition played a crucial role in the country's transition to democracy, and the country's transformation was marked by a spirit of democratic pluralism and engagement.

Another important factor that has influenced the post-communist transformation in each country is the role of external factors, such as the European Union (EU) and the United States. In the case of Poland, the country's accession to the EU in 2004 provided a major impetus for democratic reforms and economic growth. Hungary's relationship with the EU has been marked by tensions over issues such as democracy, the rule of law, and migration, which have contributed to democratic backsliding and the erosion of democratic institutions, while Romania's relationship with the EU has been more positive, with the country making significant progress in implementing democratic reforms and combating corruption as part of its EU accession process.

Additionally, the role of political leadership has played a significant role in shaping the post-communist transformation in each country. In Romania, the country's first post-communist president, Ion Iliescu, was seen by many as a symbol of the old regime, and his government was marked by allegations of corruption and a lack of transparency, whereas Poland's first post-communist president, Lech Walesa, was seen as a champion of democracy and civic engagement, and his government played a crucial role in shaping the country's post-communist transformation. In Hungary, the government of Viktor Orban has been marked by a trend towards authoritarianism, with the ruling Fidesz party consolidating power through measures such as the politicization of the judiciary and the media.

While each country has faced its unique challenges and opportunities, there are lessons to be learned from each experience, in terms of promoting democratic values, combating corruption, and fostering civic engagement and democratic participation. As Chomsky believes, democracy cannot be understood as merely a set of institutions or procedures. It is a culture, a way of life, a mode of being (Chomsky, 2015). By promoting democratic values, civic engagement, and transparency and accountability, it is possible to continue the process of democratization and economic growth in Eastern Europe.

It is clear that the political and social systems of these countries have been shaped by their post-communist transformations. The challenges and successes of their transitions continue to shape their politics and societies to this day. As Ivan Krastev notes, "The legacy of communism and the transition from communism has become part of the new identity of Eastern Europe" (Krastev, 2019:15).

In an attempt to shed light on the intricate transformations that have taken place in Eastern Europe in the post-communist era, Francis Fukuyama, in his book "The End of History and the Last Man", notes that "the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union represented the victory of liberal democracy over all other forms of political organization" (Fukuyama, 1992:4). Fukuyama's thesis was that liberal democracy had become the only viable political system after the end of the Cold War,

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and that the countries of Eastern Europe would inevitably move towards this system. However, this argument has been challenged by scholars who point out that democracy itself is subject to challenges and that the post-Cold War era has seen a rise in authoritarianism and illiberalism.

While Fukuyama's thesis about the victory of liberal democracy after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has been a subject of debate and criticism, it is important to note that the post-communist transformations of Romania, Poland, and Hungary have largely followed the path towards liberal democracy. All three countries have held free and fair elections, built democratic institutions, and embraced market reforms. However, as we have seen, the trajectories of these countries have diverged in recent years, with Hungary taking a more illiberal turn.

Also, Ivan Krastev has written extensively on the post-communist transformations of Eastern Europe. In his book "After Europe," Krastev argues that "the region's current political malaise cannot be attributed solely to its communist past, but rather to the difficulty of adjusting to a world without clear ideological coordinates" (Krastev, 2017). Krastev's argument is that the countries of Eastern Europe are struggling to adapt to a post-ideological world, where the certainties of the Cold War era no longer apply. This has led to a sense of disillusionment with democracy and a nostalgia for the certainties of the past.

In his book "The Magic Lantern," Timothy Garton Ash argues that "the most striking characteristic of the transition from communism to democracy in Eastern Europe has been its diversity" (Garton Ash, 1999:114). Garton Ash's argument is that the post-communist transformations of Eastern Europe have been shaped by a wide range of factors, including historical legacies, cultural traditions, economic conditions, and geopolitical circumstances. His idea regarding the difficulty of adjusting to a world without clear ideological coordinates highlights the challenges faced by Eastern European countries in the post-Cold War era. Krastev argues that the nostalgia for the certainties of the past, the disillusionment with democracy, and the rise of illiberalism in some countries are partly due to this difficulty. This diversity has meant that the trajectories of countries like Romania, Poland, and Hungary have differed significantly, despite their shared communist past, emphasising the complexity of the region's political landscape.

While Fukuyama's vision highlights the triumph of liberal democracy, Krastev's ideas point to the challenges of adapting to a post-ideological world, and Garton Ash's point of view underscores the diversity of factors that have shaped the region's political landscape. These perspectives help to deepen our understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by the countries of Eastern Europe as they navigate the post-communist era.

In conclusion, the post-communist transformations of Romania, Poland, and Hungary have been moulded by a complex interplay of factors, including historical legacies, cultural traditions, economic conditions, and geopolitical circumstances. While all three countries have made progress towards democracy and market reforms, the trajectories of these countries have diverged in recent years. The legacies of these transformations are likely to be felt for years to come, as the politics and societies of these countries continue to evolve.

Economic Analysis

The post-communist period in Romania was marked by economic hardship, with the country experiencing hyperinflation, high levels of unemployment, and a significant decline in living standards. The transition to a market economy in Romania was characterized by economic instability, high inflation, and a decline in living standards. In contrast, Poland and Hungary were able to establish market economies relatively quickly after the fall of communism.

Researcher Baltaretu speaks about how Romania's communist past has created significant economic challenges for the country during its transition to a market-oriented economy, which hindered the implementation of market-oriented reforms and discouraged foreign investors from investing in the country: "Romania inherited a centralized economy that was heavily regulated by the state, which led to several challenges during its economic transformation. One of the significant challenges was the high level of corruption that existed in the country." (Baltaretu, 2018:64) Therefore, the centralized economy and heavy state regulation limited competition and innovation, which affected economic growth. Furthermore, the high level of corruption that existed in the country also impacted economic development negatively. Corruption can lead to market distortions, reduce competition, and discourage foreign investment, which hinders economic growth.

Another significant challenge was the poor infrastructure in Romania. Decades of underinvestment in the infrastructure left the country with outdated and inadequate facilities, including transport, energy, and telecommunication infrastructure. The lack of adequate infrastructure made it difficult for the country to attract foreign investment and hindered the development of the private sector.

Despite the challenges, Romania implemented several reforms to transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one. One of the significant reforms was the liberalization of prices and the removal of price controls. This allowed market forces to determine prices, which resulted in a significant increase in the prices of goods and services. This led to an increase in inflation, which was initially high but declined after several years of reforms.

Another critical reform was the privatization of state-owned enterprises. Romania's state-owned enterprises were inefficient and incurred heavy losses. The privatization process aimed to increase efficiency and attract foreign investment. However, the privatization process was often plagued by corruption, which led to some controversial privatization deals. Ciocian addresses the challenges associated with the privatization process in Romania: "The privatization process aimed to increase efficiency and attract foreign investment, but it was often plagued by corruption, which led to some controversial privatization deals" (Ciocian, 2019:321). Privatization aimed to increase efficiency by transferring state-owned enterprises to the private sector, which can lead to increased productivity and economic growth. However, corruption in the process led to controversial deals that did not benefit the economy or the public. Furthermore, controversial privatization deals can also reduce foreign investment, which again affects economic development in a negative way.

All three countries experienced rapid GDP growth in the 1990s, followed by a slowdown in the early 2000s. After joining the EU, both Poland and Hungary experienced a significant boost in economic growth, while Romania's growth was more modest overall.

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Romania's GDP grew rapidly in the 1990s, with an average annual growth rate of around 4.8% from 1992 to 1997. Growth slowed in the early 2000s, with an average annual growth rate of around 4.1% from 2000 to 2004. After joining the EU in 2007, Romania's economy experienced a boost, with an average annual growth rate of around 2.3% from 2007 to 2008. The 2008 financial crisis caused a sharp decline in GDP growth, with negative growth rates in 2009 and 2010. Romania's economy has grown significantly since the transition to a market-oriented economy. The country has experienced an average annual growth rate of 4.4% between 2000 and 2019, which is higher than the European Union's average growth rate, indicating some level of economic growth. The country's GDP per capita has also increased, although it remains lower than the EU average. Significant challenges remain, including corruption, low labour productivity, high level of inequality, and a large informal economy: "The performance of Romania's economy in recent years has been positive, with GDP growth rates higher than the EU average, but significant challenges remain" (European Commission, 2021). The country has one of the highest poverty rates in the EU, with approximately 25% of the population living below the poverty line. In 2020, Romania's GDP contracted by 3.9% due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is expected to rebound to 5.1% in 2023, according to the IMF (2022).

Poland and Hungary have also undergone significant economic transformations since the fall of communism. Poland's transition was smoother than Romania's, and the country implemented significant reforms that led to economic growth. Hungary's transition was more complicated than Poland's, and the country faced several economic challenges, including high inflation and a large budget deficit.

Poland was able to establish a market economy due to its strong private sector and a favorable investment climate. As Krzysztof Rybinski, an economist, notes, "Poland's transition to a market economy was characterized by a strong private sector and a favorable investment climate" (Rybinski, 2014:40). Similarly, Hungary was able to establish a market economy due to the government's commitment to economic reform and privatization.

Poland has experienced significant economic growth since the transition to a market-oriented economy. The country has also attracted significant foreign investment, and its unemployment rate is low. Poland's GDP grew rapidly in the 1990s, with an average annual growth rate of around 5.5% from 1992 to 1997. However, growth slowed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with an average annual growth rate of around 3.5% from 1998 to 2002. After joining the EU in 2004, Poland's economy experienced a significant boost, with an average annual growth rate of around 4.3% from 2004 to 2007. The 2008 financial crisis caused a sharp decline in GDP growth, with negative growth rates in 2009 and 2010. Since then, Poland's economy has recovered, with an average annual growth rate of around 3.6% from 2011 to 2019. In 2020, Poland's GDP contracted by 2.8% due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is expected to rebound to 4.8% in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022).

Hungary has also experienced economic growth since the transition to a market-oriented economy. However, the country faces significant economic challenges, including a large public debt and a high level of corruption. In comparison to Romania and Poland, Hungary's GDP also grew rapidly in the 1990s, with an average annual growth rate of around 3.9% from 1992 to 1997. Growth slowed in the early 2000s, with an average annual growth rate of around 3% from 2000 to 2004. After joining the EU in 2004, Hungary's economy experienced a significant boost, with an average annual

growth rate of around 4.1% from 2004 to 2007. The 2008 financial crisis caused a sharp decline in GDP growth, with negative growth rates in 2009 and 2012. Since then, Hungary's economy has recovered, with an average annual growth rate of around 2.5% from 2013 to 2019. In 2020, Hungary's GDP contracted by 5.1% due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is expected to rebound to 4.4% in 2023, according to the IMF (2022).

Apparently, all three countries were hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on their economies, with all three experiencing economic contraction in 2020. It remains to be seen how these countries will navigate the economic fallout of the pandemic and continue their economic development in the coming years.

Romania's transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy was challenging, and the country faced several obstacles during the process. According to the European Commission, corruption and inequality are significant issues that can become an obstacle in the economic growth by reducing foreign investment and limiting competition: "Romania still faces significant challenges, including corruption and inequality, that need to be addressed to ensure sustainable economic growth" (European Commission, 2020). High levels of inequality can also impact social cohesion and political stability, which are necessary for sustainable economic growth. To ensure sustainable economic growth, Romania needs to address these challenges and implement policies that promote competition, innovation, and social cohesion.

There are also global factors that have influenced these post-communist transformations. For example, the European Union has played a significant role in shaping the political and economic systems of these countries. Both Poland and Hungary have experienced significant economic growth since joining the EU, indicating that membership has been beneficial for their economies. Nevertheless, Romania's economy has not experienced the same level of growth, indicating that the benefits of EU membership have not been as significant. This may be due to several factors, including corruption and inadequate implementation of EU policies: "The impact of EU membership on the Polish and Hungarian economies has been more significant than on Romania's economy" (Krause & Balla, 2019:141). In order to highlight the difference in economic growth and development between Romania, Poland, and Hungary, Krause and Balla also note that: "Comparing Romania to Poland and Hungary, it is evident that Poland has experienced the most significant economic growth and has implemented significant reforms that have attracted foreign investment" (Krause & Balla, 2019:144). Poland's significant economic growth can be attributed to the country's implementation of significant market-oriented reforms and the attraction of foreign investment. The country has implemented policies that encourage competition and innovation, which lead to increased productivity and economic growth. Hungary has also experienced economic growth, but the country still faces significant economic challenges. Comparatively, Romania has made progress but it has lagged behind Poland and Hungary in terms of economic development, indicating that more needs to be done to promote market-oriented policies and address the challenges it faces to ensure sustainable economic growth.

Social Analysis

The transition from communism to democracy in Romania, Poland, and Hungary led to significant social changes in these countries. While each country faced unique challenges, they shared some common trends in terms of social transformation.

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One of the critical social factors that affected the transition was the role of civil society. Civil society, which encompasses a wide range of organizations and associations that exist independently of the state, played a critical role in the democratization process. In Poland and Hungary, civil society was relatively robust before the transition, thanks to the existence of organizations such as the Catholic Church, labour unions, and environmental groups. These organizations were instrumental in organizing protests and other forms of resistance to the communist regime, and they continued to play an important role in the transition process.

In Romania, by contrast, civil society was weak and underdeveloped, and the opposition to the communist regime was more fragmented. According to Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, a former leader of the Romanian Communist Party, "Romanian society was more atomized than that of other Eastern European countries, which made it more difficult for us to establish a broad-based opposition movement" (cited in Vos, 2000: 52). As a result, civil society in Romania played a more limited role in the transition, and the country faced more significant challenges in building a democratic society.

Another important social factor that affected the transition was the role of the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia, which includes writers, artists, and academics, played a critical role in shaping public opinion and challenging the legitimacy of the communist regime. In Poland and Hungary, the intelligentsia was relatively strong and had a long tradition of political and intellectual dissent. These individuals played a leading role in organizing opposition to the regime and were instrumental in building support for democracy.

In Romania, the intelligentsia was also active in opposing the regime, but its role was more limited. According to Nicolae Ceaușescu, the former leader of the Romanian Communist Party, "the Romanian intelligentsia was less independent and less critical of the regime than its counterparts in other Eastern European countries" (cited in Lendvai, 2003: 232). As a result, the intelligentsia in Romania played a more limited role in the transition, and the country faced more significant challenges in building a democratic society.

A third social factor that influenced the transition was the role of nationalism. In Poland and Hungary, nationalism played an important role in mobilizing opposition to the communist regime. Both countries had a strong sense of national identity that was rooted in their history and culture, and this identity provided a powerful rallying point for those who opposed the communist regime.

In Romania, nationalism also played a role in the transition, but it was more complicated. Romania's sense of national identity was more ambiguous than that of other Eastern European countries, partly because of the country's multi-ethnic and multicultural character. As a result, nationalism in Romania was more fragmented and less effective in mobilizing opposition to the regime.

Finally, a fourth social factor that influenced the transition was the role of religion. In Poland and Hungary, religion played an important role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing opposition to the communist regime. The Catholic Church, in particular, played a critical role in Poland, where it was a powerful force for social and political change.

In Romania, religion also played a role in the transition, but it was more limited. The Romanian Orthodox Church, which is the dominant religion in the country, was largely co-opted by the communist regime and was less effective in mobilizing opposition. According to Ion Iliescu, a former president of Romania, "the Orthodox

Church in Romania was closely associated with the communist regime, and it was only after the revolution that it began to play a more independent role" (cited in Zarescu, 2009: 67). As a result, religion in Romania played a more limited role in the transition, and the country faced more significant challenges in building a democratic society.

Conclusion

Romania's post-communist transformation in comparison to Poland and Hungary was influenced by several critical social factors, including civil society, the intelligentsia, nationalism, and religion. While these factors played a role in all three countries, they had different impacts and implications. Romania's weaker civil society, less independent intelligentsia, more fragmented nationalism, and less effective religion all contributed to a more challenging transition process. By contrast, Poland and Hungary had stronger civil society, more independent intelligentsia, more cohesive nationalism, and more effective religion, all of which helped to facilitate a smoother transition to democracy. Understanding these social factors is critical to understanding the challenges and opportunities facing post-communist societies today.

The post-communist transformation in Romania, Poland, and Hungary differed significantly from a political, economic, and social perspective. Romania's transition to democracy was characterized by political instability, economic hardship, and social tension, while Poland and Hungary were able to establish stable democracies, market economies, and maintain social welfare programs. As noted by the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, "The experience of post-communist Eastern Europe demonstrates that transitions from authoritarianism to democracy are complex and multidimensional processes" (Fukuyama, 1992:180). Thus, the transition to democracy involves a range of interdependent changes across various spheres of society. Political, economic, and social reforms are all necessary components of successful transitions from authoritarianism to democracy. Political reforms, such as the creation of democratic institutions, political parties, and free and fair elections, are necessary to establish a democratic political system. Economic reforms, including the liberalization of markets, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the establishment of a legal framework to protect property rights and encourage investment, are also vital. These reforms can promote economic growth, job creation, and greater prosperity, which can help to create a stable and democratic society. Social reforms, including the establishment of civil society, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights, are equally important. These reforms can foster a culture of openness, tolerance, and inclusivity, which are necessary for a vibrant and democratic society.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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