

The Carpatho Rusyns in Serbia and Eastern Europe and the Ukrainian Crisis

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Abstract

This article explores the historical and contemporary position of the Carpatho-Rusyn minority in Eastern Europe with a focus on the different developments in Serbia and Ukraine. It traces the formation of the Rusyn literary language in Vojvodina, the national awakening of the 19th century and the complex interplay between Ukrainophile and Rusynophile orientations. Special attention is given to the post-Soviet Ukrainian state's hesitant recognition of Rusyn identity, the political mobilization of Rusyn activists, and the tensions between autonomy demands and fears of separatism. The paper also analyses the instrumentalization of the Rusyn question by Russia and Hungary in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, contrasting this with Ukraine's gradual evolution towards a European multi-ethnic state. The conclusion argues that Rusyns increasingly perceive Ukraine's European integration as their best option for securing cultural rights and future prosperity.

Keywords

Carpatho-Rusyns, minority policy, Ukraine, Serbia, language standardization, autonomy and separatism, Russian influence, European integration

Introduction: The Ruthenian Question and the Ukrainian Crisis

Even major nations such as Germany now struggle with the declining status of their national languages. Ukraine represents a particularly severe case, as both its language and national

identity are not only contested but actively denied by Russia, which has made concerted efforts to erase Ukrainian culture, language, and historical identity altogether.

For many years, the Ukrainian state itself was reluctant to acknowledge the specific rights of smaller ethnic communities within its territory—among them Hungarians, Romanians, and especially the Carpatho-Rusyns, who inhabit the far western region of Transcarpathia, on the border with Slovakia. The Rusyn ethnic group is dispersed across several Central and Eastern European countries, with the largest population residing in Ukraine.

Although academic debate continues as to whether those identifying as Rusyns constitute a distinct ethnic group, there is broad consensus that their dialects diverge significantly from standard Ukrainian¹. Scholars such as the Canadian historian Paul Robert Magocsi, the Danish linguist Tom Trier, and the author of this essay consider the Rusyn vernacular to represent an almost fully developed standard language—arguably the youngest Slavic literary language.

The Ruthenian Language in Serbia and Its Standardization

This naturally raises the question of what constitutes a standard language—particularly in the case of Rusyn. According to Peter Rehder's model of language standardisation², the Rusyn language in Vojvodina—more specifically in the Serbian region of Bačka—has succeeded in establishing a standard form. This standard is not only binding in terms of grammar, but also possesses a sufficiently developed vocabulary to serve the needs of all major sectors of Rusyn society.

The Rusyn community remains predominantly agricultural, and its lexicon contains a significant number of German loanwords relating to that domain. In the mid-18th century, large numbers of Rusyns from Subcarpathian Rus', in what is now western Ukraine, migrated to Vojvodina at the invitation of the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa.

¹ "The conclusion of the Ukraine's State Committee on the issues of nationalities and migration officially defines the 'Carpathian Rusyns' in the Transcarpathian Region of Ukraine as a subethnic group of the Ukrainian ethnos, and their language as a local dialect of Ukrainian." See: Svitlana Mitryayeva/Eva Kish: *The Carpathian Euroregion: Minority Problems* (pp. 42-46), *Role of the Carpathian Euroregion in Confronting its Minority Agenda*, Prešov, Uzhhorod, 2001, p.43. Pål Kolstø cites a conversation with officials of the Ukrainian Ministry of Migration and National Minorities in 1995, who insisted that Rusyns are "Ukrainians, plain and simple". (See P. Kolstø: *Territorial Autonomy as a Minority Rights Regime in Post-Communist Societies* (pp.200-219) in: W. Kymlicka/M. Opalski, M (eds.): *Can Liberal Pluralism be Exported. Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe*. Oxford, 2001, p. 209.

² Cf. Peter Reher (ed.): *Einführung in die slavischen Sprachen*. Darmstadt 1998.

During the 19th century, the national awakening of Slavic peoples within the Habsburg monarchy also inspired the Slovak Rusyn poet, ethnographer, philosopher, and Greek Catholic priest Alexander Duchnovych (1803–1865), who became deeply committed to promoting the language and culture of his people.

Historical Development and National Awakening

Somewhat later, Harvrijil Kostelnik (1886–1948), a Greek Catholic priest and teacher living in the Serbian region of Bačka in Vojvodina, was subjected to disparaging remarks from the editor-in-chief of the newspaper he worked for—simply because he had submitted poems written in the Rusyn dialect of his hometown.

To this day, two principal currents of opinion exist among the Rusyn community in Vojvodina: the Ukrainophiles and the Rusynophiles. Kostelnik was generally regarded as a Ukrainophile. Although he emphasised the distinctive features of Rusyn culture and the local dialect of Bačka—indeed, he authored a grammar of it—he never sought to distance the Rusyns of Vojvodina from Ukrainians, whom he considered to be closely related.

Rusynophiles, by contrast, have long asserted—and continue to maintain—that the Rusyns constitute an independent Slavic ethnic group with no more than marginal links to the Ukrainian people. This position gained ground primarily due to the minority policies of communist Eastern Europe. In both Poland and, especially, Ukraine, political leaders consistently refused to recognise the existence of a Carpatho-Rusyn minority. Demands for such recognition were categorically rejected as expressions of nationalism—an ideology perceived as a direct threat to national unity.

In contrast, socialist Yugoslavia under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito adopted a comparatively liberal minority policy, which allowed Rusyns to self-identify either as Yugoslav Rusyns or Yugoslav Ukrainians. Corresponding cultural institutions were established, and, for many, the Rusynophile orientation appeared to offer the most promising path for advancing the local Rusyn cause. Only the most radical Rusynophiles rejected any connection with the Ukrainian nation altogether.

The Rusyns of Yugoslavia have regarded—and still regard—themselves as the most developed segment of the broader Rusyn community, thanks in large part to the progressive nature of Yugoslav minority legislation. At the same time, however, they continue to feel part of the wider Rusyn world. The markedly better conditions for Rusyn culture and language in

Vojvodina, particularly in the Rusyn settlements of Ruski Kerestur and Ruski Kocur, were widely recognised beyond Yugoslav borders.

Since the 1970s, a university chair for Rusyn language and literature has existed in Novi Sad. To this day, a dedicated publishing house produces schoolbooks and literary works in Rusyn. Educational provision—from primary school to university level—has long been available for students following the Rusyn language track.

That the relatively small and predominantly agricultural Rusyn community in former Yugoslavia managed to achieve all this is widely seen as a remarkable accomplishment. It is also the main reason scholars often consider the Rusyn language of Vojvodina to be the youngest Slavic literary language. What this linguistic community still lacks, however, in order to fully meet the criteria of a fully standardised national language, is a nation-state—or at least an autonomous region of its own.

Ruthenians in Transcarpathian Ukraine

The Rusyns in Ukrainian Transcarpathia still have the longest way to go³. Rusyns there did never really intend secession, though this is what they are often suspected of. In Transcarpathia it is mainly individual activists, poets and novelists who besides their professional work write stories and poems in their local Rusyn dialect, in order to keep their local Rusyn variety alive. An example is Ivan Petrovcij, a former engineer, who published a collection of poems in 2001 under the title „Rusins'kyj eros“ („Rusyn eros“)⁴. Petrovcij even created three new letters in order to denote specific sounds of the Transcarpathian variety of Rusyn. These letters are not commonly accepted, rather considered an individual whim of the poet. On the fifth Rusyn World Congress which took place in Ushgorod in Ukraine in 1999, when Ukrainian nationalists protested against the „American separatists and imperialists“, against the „Rusyn pseudo nation“, Rusyns from Ukrainian Zakarpatia and the neighbouring countries felt as one united people, as „one force and that they would have to unite their forces with all the Rusyns around the world“. In Ukraine they wished to turn back the forced Ukrainization which in communist Slovakia had prompted Rusyns to assimilate into Slovakian culture. The claim of a distinct Rusyn identity which is mainly based on history, culture and language provoked speculations

³ Cf. A. Lansdowne: Is there a credible case for Rusyn National Self-Determination in Ukraine? A critical analysis of a self-declared ethnic minority's attempt to challenge the Ukrainian ethnonation-building project. University College London. School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies. September 2008.

⁴ Petrovcij, Ivan. *Bitangius'ki spiuvanky. Rusyns'kyi eros* (Битанґієські співанкы. Русинський ерос). Uzhhorod, 2001.

about the Rusyns' political ambitions. Beginning of the 1990s rumours spread in the Czechoslovakian and Ukrainian media that political activists in the border region would demand a return of Transcarpathia, the historical Subcarpathian Rus, to Czechoslovakia, which had governed Subcarpathia in the interwar years. Other rumours wanted to know that Subcarpathian Rus might return under Hungarian rule or be divided between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovakian government immediately denied the truth of these unfounded rumours, and no single Rusyn organization founded since 1990, nor the Rusyn World Congress which met in 1991 for the first time, made the slightest hint that a change of borders was a political aim. What the Rusyns actually wished to achieve was to be acknowledged as a independent ethnic group with all cultural and linguistic rights which independent Ukraine guaranteed all national minorities in her constitution which had just been adopted in June 1996. In 1992 the law on national minorities had been passed and a bilateral agreement had been signed between Ukraine and Hungary about the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. These laws and agreements won Ukraine international support. But there remained a gap between theory and practice which the minorities' representatives harshly criticized. The western Ukrainian Rusyns also hoped to be recognized as a separate ethnic group in their own right which the Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma promised with United States' support.

But this promise remained unfulfilled just like the one made by the later liberal presidential candidate, the leader of the Orange Revolution, Viktor Jushchenko. Accusations of Rusyn spokespersons that Kiev would violate the constitution which guarantees education in the mother tongue, also the European document on regional and minority languages, which Ukraine had ratified in 1992, went unanswered. The Danish antropologist Tom Trier said after a research trip to Transcarpathia in 1999 that „only in the Republic of Ukraine Rusyns are still denied all basic rights as an ethnic group, respectively denied the basic right to use their ethnic name Rusyn. It is difficult not to realize the problems Rusyns deal with in Ukraine, especially if you consider that the majority of Rusyns in Europe is concentrated in the Transcarpathian region.“ The second European Congress of Rusyns in October 2008 even stated that the „anti-Rusyn policy of the Ukrainian government“ would have created a situation which makes it impossible for Rusyns to live in Ukraine as an independent ethnic group. The Congress appealed to Kiev to recognize the autonomy of Subcarpathian Rus until December 1st, 2008. This harsh and ultimative demand was accompanied by affirmative and even polemical, exaggerated phrasing which revealed the high hopes and the desperation of the Rusyn representatives. Kiev's official policy would be aimed at „destroying and discriminating“ the

Rusyn ethnic group. This policy would have assumed the „character of a genocide of the Rusyn people in their homeland“. According to the Congress, Viktor Jushchenko’s attempt to bring the Holodomor, the Soviet Union’s hunger genocide against the Ukrainians in the years 1932/33, back to public memory, must therefore have an ambivalent appearance when at the same time the historical and present sufferings of minorities were being ignored and cast aside. When the regional parliament of Transcarpathia announced it would officially proclaim autonomy all its members were warned that the assembly would immediately be dissolved and its resolutions declared null and void. The Rusyns’ spokespersons, the priests Dmitrij Sidor and Bohdan Zhupan, were accused of working against the country’s territorial integrity. Ukraine which after decades of Soviet repression and lack of freedom understandably feared rifts and separatism which partly explains the strong reaction⁵. There were not only the demands of small minorities like the Rusyns, but also the growing discontent of radical Russian groups in Ukraine’s Eastern parts, with targeted support from Russia, and the Hungarian minority in Western Ukraine which right-wing politicians in Budapest and lately PM Viktor Orbán misused to stir up sentiment against Kiev. The Ukrainian government saw no reason to even mention the Rusyns in a Foreign Office document outlining Ukraine’s wish to join the European Union, in the chapter about the „protection of the rights of Ukrainian citizens“. The law on higher education which the Ukrainian Ministry of Education introduced in December 2008, portended new trouble. Ukrainian was set as the official lingua franca and the language of education which would have limited the minorities’ right to education in their mother tongue, were it Rusyn, Romanian or Hungarian. The self-proclaimed Prime Minister of Transcarpathia, Petar Geko, complained to the *Rossijskaja Gazeta* that Transcarpathia would provide a quarter of Ukraine’s national budget. The gas pipelines would run across the region but little of the revenues would stay there. If autonomy did not materialize then they would fight for independence.

⁵ D'Anieri, Kravchuk and Kuzio observe that in Ukraine, “the process of nation-building is tightly bound up with that of state building.” See: Paul D'Anieri, Robert Kravchuk, Taras Kuzio: *Politics and Society in Ukraine*. Oxford, 1999, p. 47. The Ukraine Census of 2001 recorded that the Ukrainian state population includes 18 ethnonationalities numbering 30,000 persons or more. (See: All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001: National Composition of Population <http://www.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>. Birgersson notes: “Point 1 of Article 2 of the Ukrainian Law on Citizenship stipulates that all persons living in Ukraine at the time this law was passed (excluding foreigners who are citizens of other countries) became Ukrainian citizens unless they purposely chose to become citizens of a state other than Ukraine. This is in stark contrast to the policies of other [Soviet] Successor States where the government expressly declares nationality to be the basis for the state.” See Birgersson, Susanne Michele, *After the Break-up of a Multi-ethnic Empire: Russia, Successor States and Eurasian Security*, London & Westport CT, 2002, p.111. At the same time, a second project attempts to clarify the boundaries of the titular ethnonation within the Ukrainian state: “When it comes to identity, language can have a strong symbolic value as a marker of group distinctiveness. The Ukrainian language seems to have taken on a role as a symbol of Ukrainian identity.”

Petar Gecko, a representative of the Transcarpathian Rusyns turned to dictatorial Russia, from all places, to Russian president Putin with a request to recognize the independence of Subcarpathian Rus from Ukraine. The Soym, the regional parliament of Transcarpathia, issued an appeal for assistance to the governments and parliaments of the Czech Republic, the European Union and the Russian Federation. The Council of Europe, the OECD and other international organizations were asked to formally assess Ukraine's deficit in minority issues, also in terms of the completely different, more positive situation of Carpatho-Rusyns in the Czech Republic, in Slovakia, Hungary and Serbia. In 2006, the UN Commission on Ethnic Discrimination said it was concerned about the situation of Rusyns in Ukraine and called on Kiev to reconsider the recognition of Rusyns as a distinct national minority. In conclusion, the commission even noted that there are „significant differences between Rusyns and Ukrainians“. Kiev did not seem to be impressed by this, nor by the fact that Rusyn activists suggested that Kiev's political class should at least be ashamed, when even Serbia, which is on the pillar for her treatment of her minorities, received a much better report regarding the Rusyn minority on its territory. In Ukraine, the Ukrainization of Rusyns was an urgent problem, while in Serbian Vojvodina it was and is open to Rusyns whether they declare themselves Ukrainians or autochthonous Vojvodina Rusyns. Though nationalists imagined the worst it could be excluded that a Rusyn declaring to be indigenous would have any hard political consequences. It was only during the Yugoslav Civil War of the 1990s that Serbian nationalists doubted the loyalty of Rusyns living in Serbia. In Croatia, the government decided to unite the Croatian Rusyns with the Ukrainian minority into one group, which meant that the Rusyns no longer had a national representation there.

Ukrainian Carpatho-Rusyns first reacted with enthusiasm when the Russian Federation recognized Rusyns as a separate ethnic group in 2004, even though Rusyns have almost nothing to do with Russia historically and culturally. The precarious situation of Rusyns in Ukraine, the fact that Kiev ignored their pleas and demands, this was enough to idealize Russia, even though Putin treated minorities in his country far worse. The Ukrainian government accused Russia of promoting ethnic tensions in its own interest, which in retrospect proved all too justified given Moscow's support for Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The fact that Ukrainian Rusyns allowed themselves to be instrumentalized by Moscow was also unfortunate for a cultural reason that would have made Rusyns natural allies of the Western-oriented Orange Revolution. The majority of Western Ukrainian Rusyns, as well as Rusyns in Serbia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary, belongs to the Uniate, Greek Catholic Church and feels

culturally affiliated to Central Eastern Europe or even Western Europe. Even if they campaigned for the autonomy of Transcarpathia within a federalized Ukraine, this did not mean that there could be any doubt about their loyalty to the Ukrainian state association. When the referendum on Ukraine's independence was held in December 1991, Transcarpathia also voted on the autonomy of the region. In Transcarpathia, 92.6 percent voted for the independence of Ukraine, and 76.8 percent for self-government for Transcarpathia. The positive attitude of the population of Transcarpathia towards Ukrainian statehood, and at the same time towards promotion of the region's autonomy, could have encouraged Kiev to meet the Rusyns halfway.

Between Autonomy and Separatism

The fundamentally different experiences of Rusyns in Serbia and Rusyns in Ukraine also influenced their view of the Maidan revolution. That part of Serbian Rusyns who identify as Ukrainians loudly protested against Putin's „lies about Crimea and Ukraine“ that Russian propaganda would spread. The Ukrainian Rusyns were divided. The All-Carpathian Union of Rusyns said that Ukrainian Rusyns cannot forget the terror that came to Rusyns with the Soviet Russian occupation and annexation of 1944 and in the decades that followed. Therefore, the association also condemned Russia's occupation of Crimea. Gecko seriously asked the Russian president to restore the pre-Soviet status of the Republic of Subcarpathian Russia and, as in Syria, to play his „peacekeeping role“ in Ukraine. The language of the open letter to the Russian president suggested to some that it was written not by Rusyns, but by Russians, in the context of the Kremlin's anti-Ukrainian propaganda, Ukrainian and Rusyn commentators said. Representatives of the All-Carpathian Union of Rusyns scolded Gecko, the official author of the letter to Putin, an agent of Moscow who is trying to divide the Carpatho-Rusyn community. The association strongly opposed Gecko's individual opinion, which would in no way serve the interests of Ukrainian Rusyns, and reaffirmed its position that only the European integration of the Transcarpathian Rusyns could be forward-looking.

Paul Robert Magocsi, famed and defamed as the „father of Rusyns“, also played the (Western) European card, namely in the context of the annexation crisis of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, in order to preserve Rusyn culture and language for the future within a European Ukraine. Magocsi, who has always strongly opposed Ukrainian separatist accusations against Ukrainian Rusyns, said in a 2014 lecture he gave at the John Yaremko Department of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto that Russia, as well as Orban's Hungary, are misusing Ukrainian Rusyns for their own purposes to stoke anti-Kiev sentiment. Orban and Putin are the

false, crude products of the post-Soviet history of their countries, which feel entitled to achieve anachronistic political goals⁶. In Orban's case, one of those misguided goals was Greater Hungary before Trianon, including Vojvodina, Burgenland and Transcarpathia. Since Orban first won an election, in pursuing this goal he sees it as his duty to defend the rights of Hungarians abroad. This includes about 100,000 Hungarians in Ukraine. Putin and Orban are playing the Carpathian-Rusyn card out of purely selfish interests, Magocsi said.

Russia and Hungary's Role in the Ruthenian Question

Moscow would pursue a variety of goals if it supported the secessionist aspirations of Rusyns and Hungarians living on Ukraine's western border. On the one hand, this should divert Kiev's attention from Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbass, in the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces. Moscow's policy would then cement the close relationship between Putin and the pro-Russian Orbán government in Budapest, which acts as a defender of Rusyn interests against the interests of Ukrainians. The Rusyns would unwittingly support this Kremlin agenda. In its appeal, the Carpatho-Rusyn Consortium of North America condemned Ukraine for refusing to recognize Rusyns as a nationality, a step that all other countries in the region have already taken.

The demand for autonomy is tricky because it could be misunderstood as secession, as an attempt to weaken the territorial and national integrity of Ukraine, on which Hungary and Russia would rely. The demand for autonomy could exacerbate ethnic tensions between Rusyns and ethnic Ukrainians in western Ukraine. Moscow intervened in the Rusyn affair only to drive a wedge into Ukrainian society and at the same time reach a deal with Budapest, which in turn caused headaches for the European Union. The Rusyn community, whether in Ukraine, Serbia or Canada, very quickly realized that Russian support was never sincere. Articles in the Russian media about the „Rusyn question“ and the corresponding Russian position confirmed this theory. Russia should highlight Rusyn culture and language in the media and offer humanitarian aid, publish reports about Ukrainian Rusyns in the Russian media, but not only in the media addressing Western audiences. The unproblematic cultural discourse would automatically increase pressure on Kiev to grant autonomy to Rusyns. If Moscow's agenda is finally grasped in all its aspects, it would be too late, as was the case when Putin annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014.

⁶ Cf. Mary Elise Sarotte: *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (The Henry L. Stimson Lectures Series). Yale University Press 2022; Peter Pomerantsev: *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*. Faber & Faber, London 2017; Peter Pomerantsev: *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*. Faber, London 2020.

Yet, Moscow only had a chance to exploit the Rusyns' sensibilities for its own agenda, as long as the European Union was unable to impose itself against Kiev which turned a deaf ear to Carpatho-Rusyn complaints. It was only under these circumstances that Russia appeared to some Ukrainian Rusyns as a beacon of hope. The annexation of Crimea was met with restrained envy from part of the Rusyn ethnic group. What the Rusyns had not achieved in two decades, even in the small form of regional autonomy, the Russians in Crimea would have achieved in a very short time thanks to Russia's strong support. Of course, many Rusyns suspected from the start that their recognition by Russia in 2004 was more than purely symbolic, a provocative hint to Kiev, which was actually pointing in the direction of eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Even after the annexation of Crimea, Moscow never seriously considered intervening in favour of Carpatho-Rusyns, even when the West considered a Russian attack on Ukraine's western and northern neighbours, i.e. the Baltic states, to be possible. Some representatives of the Rusyn community in Ukraine put their hopes on the federalization of Ukraine and limited autonomy solutions, which would reduce tensions not only in the Rusyn case, but would also increase the risks, as evidenced by violent Russian separatism in eastern Ukraine. It remains a tragic phenomenon that authoritarian, if not totalitarian and imperialist Russia, of all countries, looked like a beacon of hope for a minority traditionally oriented towards Central Europe such as the Carpatho-Rusyns.

The Rusyn community, whether in Ukraine, Serbia or Canada, very quickly realized that Russian support was never sincere. It only served foreign policy purposes. Rusyn publicists such as Magocsi or Julian Tamash from Vojvodina, previously warned against false trust in Russia. Rusyns as well as Ukrainians had almost no cultural rights in the inhabited areas that were under the rule of the Russian Tsar. Rusyns and Ukrainians, however, who lived under the rule of the Austrian Emperor, enjoyed far broader cultural and even political rights⁷. Today's western Ukraine was a space in which the idea of a separate Ukrainian nation could develop, but also the idea that Rusyns were more than a peasant people. Such a development would never have been imaginable under Russian rule. The Russian aggression and the unspeakable crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine against defenceless civilians and priceless cultural heritage prove that not much has changed since Tsarist days and the days of Soviet dictatorship when Ukrainian culture and language were subjected to radical russification.

⁷ Cf. Robert A. Kann: *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1526-1918*. University of California Press 1980.

Conclusion: Future Prospects for Ruthenian Identity

The debate about the political positioning of Ukrainian Rusyns highlights the contrast between a basically democratic Ukraine, which has ultimately come to accept herself as a European multi-ethnic state, and a Russia that, despite having shaped Europe's cultural and intellectual history, now seems to have turned away from it. As in the Soviet past, Russian domination is exercised with all its political and military might against ethnic and religious minorities. It is therefore little wonder that, despite political struggles and the relative progress of Rusyns in neighbouring countries, Carpatho-Rusyns in Ukraine today regard the Ukrainian option as their best choice. Ukraine's road to EU membership is open, and once the war is over, Rusyn citizens of Ukraine may enjoy all the benefits a democratic, free and prosperous political community can offer, where all citizens are free to live their cultural, religious and ethnic traditions.

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