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SHAPING THE TERRITORY IN SCOTLAND, CATALONIA AND FLANDERS

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Analysing contemporary debates on devolution and independence from a spatial planning and territorial cohesion lens

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1. Introduction

Several member states of the European Union have, in recent months, been faced with a strengthening of claims for territorial independence, or for more decentralization or devolution, from one of their constituent units with a strong regional or national identity: Scotland in the United Kingdom, Catalonia in Spain, and Flanders in Belgium are the most notable examples. Such claims are not new and have a political history that goes back to the 19th century in those three countries. What seems to be new is their intensification in a context of global and European economic crisis, which has led particular political and social forces in those regions/nations to strengthen their critique of the existing model of fiscal redistribution and power allocation in place within their nation-state and demand that constitutional changes be implemented to gain adequate means to steer and finance their own regional development. A close look at the media and political discourses surrounding the Scottish, Catalan and Flemish question in recent months reveal that arguments related to the 'politics of territorial solidarity' (Béland and Lecours, 2008), to territorial justice, spatial redistribution and the planning and financing of large-scale infrastructure, while not entirely new, have gained ground, perhaps at the expense of more culturalist and identity-based arguments. Indeed, also beyond Europe separatist challengers to the state made their case for greater autonomy based not only identity-based arguments but on considerations about a fair distribution of resources within the state (Bakke, 2014).

Spatial planning is a form of public policy focused on the organization of the territory at different scales - local, regional, national and transnational. It entails the regulation and control of land uses, building and urban development; the spatial distribution of key infrastructures and public or collective amenities; the protection of specific areas of natural, environmental or historic value. Planning is a key arena in which the relationship between the state, the market and civic society is crystalized in relation to land uses and urban development - one in which particular 'models of society' (Davoudi, 2007; Faludi, 2007) and cultural/political choices about the built and natural environment coalesce. As such, one may therefore expect spatial planning to become mobilized, or shaped, by political parties with a nationalist or separatist agenda. Such parties may invoke a particular 'territorial imaginary' or 'collective territorial imagination' (Peel and Lloyd, 2007) to support their vision in discourses on difference or separatism, or can potentially propose alternative visions of the territory or of the substantive principles underpinning territorial development policies.

The aim of this working paper is therefore to bring together some of the perspectives offered by two strands of disciplines – geography and planning on the one hand, political science and public policy on the other – to analyse the current debates on the devolution and/or potential independence of Scotland, Catalonia and Flanders from a spatial planning, regional policy and territorial cohesion perspective.¹ The paper offers preliminary thoughts – to be developed further – in response to the following questions: How has the spatial planning culture of these three regions/nations changed after each of them acquired a significant degree of devolution/decentralization? How have spatial planning and territorial development issues gained ground as important arguments in the current political debates (for example with regard to transport infrastructure planning)? How are spatial planning and territorial development policies mobilized in the political agendas of various parties in those territories? These questions are addressed in the second part of the paper. Prior to that, the degree of decentralization achieved in Scotland, Flanders and Catalonia is briefly described, in order to understand how those regions/nations have acquired policy competences in a wide-ranging set of areas which shape the development of their territory. The recent rise of political and social forces demanding more autonomy, or even separation, from the central state in those three regions/nations is also briefly described.

2. Decentralization in Scotland, Flanders and Catalonia

Scotland in the United Kingdom, Catalonia in Spain, and Flanders in Belgium have a long history of claims for more regional autonomy and have been characterized by significant degrees of decentralization over the past two decades. For example, they now each have their own parliament, government and executive leader. Decentralization means that power is shared between tiers of government and that lower tier units - such as regions, provinces, or *Länder* - exercise some form of self-governance. The kind and amount of autonomy exercised by lower tiers vary across and within states. Political scientists interested in how decentralization measures can help govern divided societies often focus on three dimensions of decentralization. *Policy decentralization* (or decision-making decentralization) ‘exists if at least one subnational tier of government has exclusive authority to make decisions on at

¹ On 15 November 2013, a [seminar](#) funded by the UCL European Institute and the UCL Bartlett School of Planning brought together a group of geographers and spatial planners – whose disciplines and practices centre on notions of territorial justice, spatial organisation and infrastructure planning – and put them in dialogue with political scientists and public policy experts specialized in the study of intra-state conflicts, decentralization and federalism. They analysed current debates on the devolution and/or potential independence of Scotland, Catalonia and Flanders from a spatial planning, regional policy and territorial cohesion perspective. This working paper addresses some of the key questions and issues discussed on that day.

least one policy issue' (Treisman, 2007: 24). *Fiscal decentralization* typically refers to a division of tax revenues where regional and local governments account for a large share of public revenues or spending, but it can also refer to the decentralization of decision-making on issues of taxation and expenditures (Rodden, 2004). *Political decentralization* refers to whether regional and local governments are elected by popular vote, and in this vein scholars have examined whether regional and national executives share political party affiliation. Any one country can 'score' differently across these three dimensions of decentralization and over time, and there is also often asymmetry within countries, as some regions have more autonomy than others. This is why it is necessary to briefly summarize the political and administrative arrangements currently in place in the three countries considered here to understand their current state of decentralization.

Scotland (population 5.3 million) is a constituent nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, a unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy with devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The Scotland Act passed by the New Labour government in 1998 led to the election of the first Scottish Parliament in May 1999 and to the formation of a new Scottish devolved government in charge of a wide-ranging set of policy fields. **Catalonia** (population 7.6 million) is one of the 17 Autonomous Communities of Spain, a unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 proclaims the 'indivisible unity of the Spanish nation' but also states the right to self-government of the 'nationalities and regions of Spain'. The Spanish state has, since 1978, evolved into a highly decentralized so-called 'State of Autonomies', characterized by a system of asymmetrical devolution whereby the distribution of powers is different for every Autonomous Community, each with its own Statutes of Autonomy defining governmental structures and competences. The Basque Country and Navarre have full fiscal autonomy. Andalusia, Catalonia, and Galicia, which do not have full fiscal autonomy, nonetheless have more powers than most other Autonomous Communities. In Catalonia the initial Statute of Autonomy agreed in 1979 was revised in 2006. **Flanders** (population 6.35 million) is one of three regions, alongside Wallonia and Brussels Capital, in the Kingdom of Belgium, a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy which is also made of three linguistic communities (Dutch, French, German) and four language areas. The modern nation-state of Belgium was founded as a unitary state in 1831 following the secession of southern provinces from the Netherlands. It remained a highly centralized state until the 1970s. In 1980, following Flemish demands, cultural communities were granted competences related to personal matters and the Flemish and Walloon regions were established. Their competences were gradually expanded through six state reforms between 1980 and 2011.

The range of competences and policy fields now in the hands of these three regions/nations is broadly similar, and besides culture, linguistic matters and education, includes many (although not all) of the fields which directly shape the spatial organization of their territory: rural development, internal transport, local government, housing, environment, tourism, economic development, regional and urban planning. In all three cases, with some variation, the central state retains competence in constitutional matters, foreign affairs, defence and national security, social security, immigration and nationality, energy regulation and various aspects of transport and taxation. In spite of the high degree of decentralization/devolution achieved in the three countries to date, it has become increasingly apparent that none has reached a stable consensus about the distribution of powers between different tiers of government. In all three countries, the central state and its nationalities and regions have struggled to find a lasting, broadly accepted formula for the distribution of power. Spain and the UK are not federal states but 'countries where improvised political solutions have bestowed varying degrees of self-rule on different areas, imparting a lopsided and contested quality to the overall settlements' (Barber, 2012: np).

3. The rise of separatist claims over the past decade

In all three regions, political and social forces demanding more autonomy, or even separation, from the central state, have significantly grown and moved to the forefront of the political landscape over the past decade. Between 1999 and 2006 **Scotland** was governed by a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. In 2007, following its electoral success the Scottish National Party (SNP) formed a minority government. In 2011, its electoral scores rose further, which allowed the SNP to form a majority government and promise that it would hold a referendum on Scottish independence. On 15 October 2012 the UK's Prime Minister David Cameron and Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond signed an agreement setting out the terms of a Scottish independence referendum, which will take place on 18 September 2014. If the 'no' wins, there will nonetheless be further changes to the current devolution settlement between the UK and Scotland, as the full provisions of the [Scotland Act passed in 2012](#) will be rolled out.

In **Catalonia**, in 2006 a new [Statute of Autonomy](#) was approved by the Spanish Parliament, by the Catalan Parliament and by popular referendum in Catalonia, but was immediately challenged in front of the Spanish Constitutional Court by the right-wing centralist *Popular Party* (PP). In 2010 the Constitutional Court published its sentence on the Statute of

Autonomy, culling significant parts of the text. This led to massive public protests and rallies in Catalonia. The popular vote for independentist parties in Catalonia subsequently increased (e.g. for *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, ERC), and a significant fraction of the parties that were nationalist but not independentist (i.e. *Convergència i Unió*, CiU) began to support 'the right to decide' of the Catalan people. The tensions between the Catalan and the Spanish central governments have stepped up since 2011, when the *Popular Party* won the Spanish general elections. In Catalonia the current separatist movement is fuelled by a number of citizens' initiatives and grassroots movements (such as the Platform for the Right to Decide or Catalan National Assembly), as [analysed by Miquel Strubell](#) in a public event organised by the UCL European Institute on 25th October 2013. On 11th September 2012 one and a half million citizens gathered in a mass demonstration in Barcelona under the motto 'Catalonia, a new state in Europe'. This demonstration led to the organization of anticipated regional elections in November 2012, which led to political parties supporting the right to self-determination of Catalonia now representing nearly two-thirds of the Catalan Parliament. The Catalan government is now governed by a coalition between the left-wing ERC and centre-right nationalist party CiU, although the fracture lines within the CiU party mean that the word 'independence' is not actually used by the Catalan government. In January 2013, the Catalan government made a declaration on sovereignty and the 'right to decide' and announced plans for a referendum to take place in November 2014, something consistently opposed (and declared illegal under the current Constitution) by the Spanish central government.

In **Flanders**, successive state reforms have not managed to quench Flemish demands. Since the early 2000s, two Flemish nationalist parties have been on the rise: the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a conservative party, and the Vlaams Belang (VB), a far-right party. In June 2009 the Flemish regional elections brought a coalition government of Christian-Democrats, N-VA and Social-Democrats to power. In June 2010, at the Belgian general elections, 44 per cent of the Flemish electorate in Flanders voted for the two Flemish nationalist parties, while in Wallonia, more than a third of voters supported the Socialist Party. Belgium was 589 days without a new government, until a coalition was formed in December 2011 between the Social democrats, Christian Democrats and Liberals, but without the N-VA. The municipal elections of November 2012 again brought significant gains for the N-VA. The party leader Bart De Wever (Antwerp's Mayor) pressed Belgium's Prime Minister to prepare for confederalist reform before the next federal and regional elections (which will take place in [May 2014](#)) to enable both Flanders and Wallonia to 'look after their own affairs' and gain fiscal independence.

The rise of separatist agendas in the three regions/nations displays striking parallels, although there are also noticeable differences which cannot be fully analysed here, for example between the more bottom-up nature of the movement in Catalonia in contrast to its more top-down nature in Scotland. The rise of such agendas may appear paradoxical following a period of increasing decentralization from the central state to the regions/nations in the three countries concerned. Considering the broader literature on decentralization and federalism as means to resolve territorial conflicts (violent or not), this outcome may not be surprising. Kristin Bakke's (2006; 2009; 2014) research contributes to our understanding of decentralization's *varying* capacity to help stem or prevent separatist struggles. While policy-makers increasingly have come to pin their hopes for intrastate peace and stability on measures of decentralization - in conflicts from Bosnia to Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria - her research emphasizes that such measures are no panacea for internally divided states. Indeed, the merits of decentralization as a means to contain intrastate conflicts depend not only on the design of specific institutions, but on how these respond to ethnic and economic traits of the societies they are meant to govern. The existing literature has shown that policy autonomy in certain fields (e.g. cultural and education policy) can help stem self-determination struggles. However, conditional variables such as ethnic demographics and the basis for ethnic solidarity/mobilization explain why while some self-determination movements may be satisfied with cultural policy autonomy, others may not. Likewise, it is widely thought that fiscal autonomy enables policy autonomy and can help prevent self-determination conflict. This depends, however, on levels of wealth in regions and on inter-regional inequality. While fiscal autonomy is likely to contain self-determination conflict if a region is relatively resource rich, it may have the reverse effect if the region is relatively resource poor. And if we look at the country as a whole, fiscal decentralization is likely to prevent self-determination conflict in countries characterized by low inter-regional inequality. It may have the reverse effect, however, in countries characterized by high inter-regional inequality. This means that a consideration of what kind of institutional arrangements 'works' is likely to be conditional on societal traits.

In the specific cases of Scotland, Flanders and Catalonia, some common factors explain the recent increase in popularity of separatist parties and have been recurrently highlighted in the European media: the key role of a new generation of charismatic leaders (Alex Salmond, leader of the SNP and Scotland's First Minister; Artur Mas, leader of CiU and President of the Catalan government and Kris Peeters, leader of the N-VA and Flanders' Minister-President); a certain form of emulation between separatist discourses across Europe; and above all the impact of the economic crisis on the terms of the debate about the politics of territorial

solidarity between the constituent units of a nation. The recession, which has affected all European countries post-2008, has clearly fuelled separatist discourses. Catalonia is Spain's wealthiest region, accounting for one fifth of the Spanish economy. Central government cuts in public expenditure have reinforced long-standing Catalan demands for more fiscal autonomy on the grounds that the region gives more to Madrid's central government than it receives back. In Belgium, the N-VA argues that wealthy Flanders should not be subsidising its poorer neighbour Wallonia. The Scottish case is different, in that Scotland is often argued to benefit rather favourably from the system of financial allocation to the devolved nations of the UK (under the so-called Barnett formula), but the question of the oil resources located on Scottish territory is an important element in the current debate.

Beyond the effect of the post-2008 recession on public opinion, however, these recent developments have to be read within broader processes of territorial transformation and re-scaling which have been going on for several decades (Keating, 2013). First, they take place in the context of the welfare state reforms initiated two or three decades ago in many European countries, characterized by state territorial decentralization and a shift away 'from the equalizing approach of the Keynesian welfare state to the promotion of market-based regulatory arrangements by the "neoliberal" state', which means that subnational territories 'can no longer count on the central state redistributing resources and safe-guarding minimum levels of welfare throughout the country' (Varrö, 2012: 29), and have to assume more responsibility for their own prosperity and territorial 'competitiveness' (e.g. France, Germany). Second, these recent developments take place in a context whereby we witness the 'denaturalization' of nation-state space (Brenner et al., 2003), a process which 'reveals that members and groups of societies might keep sharing a space [...] but have no pre-given common interests as to how to *order* that space in the broad sense of the term' (Varrö, 2012: 30). This applies to territorial ordering, or to territorial planning at various scales.

4. Spatial planning and the politics of territorial identity in an era of separatist agendas

In essence, the respective discourses of pro-independence, federalist, and more centralist/unionist advocates in the three countries/regions display competing visions and models of spatial justice, territorial solidarity, and territorial redistribution. The territorial framework of reference at which key redistributive policies (e.g. social security, healthcare

and pensions) and fiscal transfers should take place is a major bone of contention - the one that distinguishes between the different options being discussed in the three polities. Debates on social policy are central to the processes of territorial mobilization involved in sub-state nationalist movements, because social policy represents a tangible manifestation of the existence of a political community:

Social policy can be integrated with a broader discourse of mobilization by nationalist leaders who argue that social programs are threatened by the selfish and irresponsible actions of the other government(s) and that increased political autonomy, or even independence, represents the only way to preserve the quality of social protection for the community. Nationalist leaders can also suggest that autonomy or independence is needed for their community because it pursues fundamentally different social and economic objectives from the other (Béland and Lecours, 2005: 679).

Beyond social policy issues, there are signs that spatial planning and territorial development issues have gained ground as important arguments in the current debates. Planning is a product of specific historical, cultural, geographical, constitutional, administrative, economic, and political factors, and differs widely across countries. In most European countries there is a three-tier planning system with national policies, regional plans, and local plans, which are legally binding on development proposals. In Belgium, Spain and the UK, there is, however, virtually no 'national planning': the general competence for spatial planning has been devolved to the regions/devolved nations. Following this decentralization of planning competences, in the three regions/nations considered here, there is evidence that the practices and culture of spatial planning changed and diverged - to a smaller or greater extent - from those of the other regions/nations of the state of which they are a part. In the UK, devolution and the emergence of new sub-national planning spaces have generated a variety of 'spatial plannings' between and within the nations of the UK (Haughton et al., 2009). Scotland has always had a separate planning system, but after 1999, and more markedly after 2006 (when new Scottish Planning legislation was enacted) and 2010 (change of UK and of Scottish governments), the orientations given to Scottish planning have become more divergent from that of the UK central government, with a more interventionist, more pluralistic and corporatist agenda (Lloyd and Peel, 2009; Inch, 2013; Tomaney and Colomb, 2013).

This has also been the case in Spain and Belgium, where both Catalonia and Flanders have been perceived as pioneers in the emergence of new ‘cultures of planning’, which differ from the practices and cultures of neighbouring regions. In Catalonia, between 2001 and 2010 the tri-partite governing coalition passed a number of wide-ranging laws which reformed the planning system, creating a comprehensive system of territorial plans at various scales covering the whole of Catalonia, new laws to protect coastal areas, tackle the urban sprawl of the past decades and support the integrated urban regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods (Nel-lo, 2012a, 2012b). In Flanders, gradual devolution was accompanied by significant reforms of the planning system in the mid-1990s and the creation of multi-level governance arrangements in which the regional, provincial and municipal tiers each prepare a structure plan and a series of implementation plans (Albrechts, 2001). The Flemish regional government became a strong advocate of the shift from traditional land use regulations to a more proactive, future-oriented approach to shaping sustainable territorial development involving multiple stakeholders, which has been symbolised by the first Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen – RSV) approved in 1997 – a plan which attracted significant international attention.

Are these trends surprising? The political science literature on decentralization suggests that we should expect policy divergence in devolved matters and the rise of new ‘policy communities’ (Keating, 2005, 2009), although this is not always the case. The divergent trajectories of spatial planning in the three regions/nations, in that context, cannot simply be analysed ‘as an expression of devolution’, but are ‘part of the wider restructuring of the state where devolution fulfils the important political and administrative function of encouraging diversity and distinctiveness in territorial management in the broader sense’ (Haughton et al., 2009: 12). This is where the ideology and political vision of the parties that govern the devolved nations/regions come into play. Strategic spatial planning

is a highly normative construct and practice. It does not offer a singular or technical set of solutions and processes to deal with the allocation of resources, but rather is a complex socially constructed set of behaviours, where spatial policy is “a grand narrative” that can seek to create a “common identity” and “collective goods” (Dabinett, 2011: 6).

If spatial policy contributes to creating a ‘common identity’, then it is not surprising that such policy might be mobilized, or shaped, by political parties with a nationalist or separatist agenda. Such parties may invoke a particular ‘territorial imaginary’ or ‘collective territorial

imagination' (Peel and Lloyd, 2007) in discourses on difference or separatism, or could potentially propose alternative visions of the territory or of the substantive principles underpinning territorial development policies, either explicitly or implicitly. In Scotland, for example, the SNP's arguments for independence have increasingly drawn on economic arguments rather than identity-based claims. Spatial planning has consequently grown in importance as the spatial expression of the Scottish economic strategy, centrally concerned with creating a low carbon society. The SNP Government's discourse exhibits a clear belief in the value of planning as a positive means of steering spatial development, in marked contrast to David Cameron's view of planning in England. Albeit bounded by the predominantly neoliberal context in which Scotland is also immersed, spatial planning in Scotland

has acquired a centrality to the SNP's agenda, partly because key levers necessary to achieve its programmatic objectives, such as taxation and energy policy, remain reserved powers, but partly also because the strategic, visionary element of planning is seen as supporting its vision for an independent Scotland. At the same time, there seems to be a firm consensus in Scotland about the value of proactive spatial planning, which chimes with what are widely perceived to be distinctive Scottish values about the role of the state in securing equitable social and economic outcomes (Tomaney and Colomb, 2013).

In Flanders, by contrast, although the planning portfolio is currently in the hands of the N-VA, the Flemish nationalist party, it may be argued that a weakening of strategic spatial planning is currently being witnessed, since the conservative nationalist Flemish government generally favours pro-growth, market-based and greenfield solutions to planning problems which are at odds with the principles of the previous Flemish spatial plan (Tomaney and Colomb, 2014).

The political economy of large-scale infrastructure investments has also played an increasing role in current debates and discourses surrounding separatist mobilisations, particularly in the case of Spain and Catalonia. The Catalan government has heavily criticized the past orientations of the Spanish central government's transport infrastructure policy, characterized by a historically-rooted convergence of all transport networks towards Madrid (what Bel calls the 'radial State', 2010). The lack of support shown by central government towards the Mediterranean rail corridor, which would strengthen the economic position of Catalonia and has now been approved as a key project by the EU under the [Trans-European Transport Network](#) policy, is a particularly contentious issue.

5. Conclusion

Geographers and spatial and regional planners have, for the most part, not publically engaged with the current debates on devolution and independence in the three countries discussed here from the perspective of their discipline (with a recent exception in Spain, see Gómez Mendoza et al., 2013). Yet researchers and practitioners from those 'spatial' disciplines have a lot to offer to both the academic and expert community and the general public with regard to current debates on regional devolution and independence in EU member states. As Oriol Nel-lo, professor of planning at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and former Secretary for Territorial Planning of the Catalan government suggests, geographers and planners can help deconstruct territorial abstractions, provide clear and sound data and analyses (e.g. on inter-regional disparities and policies, the use of natural resources, the allocation of public resources, planning and management of infrastructure, urban dynamics and land uses) and build new models of representation and analysis of spatial configurations. They can unpack the fraught spatial metaphors, which have taken a central role in political, media and popular debates and which are often used to mask the reality that it is not *territories* which compete, but social groups, economic interests and political projects. The contributions of spatial planners and geographers, however, need to be developed in cooperation with political scientists and public policy experts specialized in the study of intra-state conflicts, decentralization and federalism, as well as welfare and spatial economists. This can help throw light on the potential implications of different models of state restructuring from a territorial development and territorial cohesion perspective, and offer constructive thoughts on issue of spatial and territorial justice at different scales.

Finally, the potential role of the EU in dealing with and helping to resolve claims for more territorial autonomy is crucial. Separatist parties make constant reference to the participation of their potentially independent nations in the EU (although there is a lot of legal and political uncertainty about the EU membership of a new European state created by secession from an existing EU member state). The potentially constructive and positive role of the EU was highlighted by a North-American commentator in a report for the US Justice Department (Connolly, 2013) on the possibility of independence in Catalonia, Scotland and Flanders:

How the EU addresses self-determination claims could have important ramifications beyond Europe. To be sure, the EU's level of supranational integration is without parallel in other parts of the world. Moreover, the peaceful and democratic nature of Western Europe's separatist disputes - the lack, as one journalist quipped, of

'Wallonian death squads roaming the Flemish countryside' - is at odds with the circumstances prevailing in the many states where separatist conflicts fuel violence and political instability. There would appear to be less at stake in Scotland or Catalonia than in Kashmir or Kurdistan. But the environment in which Western Europe's separatist disputes play out offers a stable space in which to attempt unique solutions to self-determination claims that might have value elsewhere. These solutions need not reflect the state/non-state duality inherent in current conceptions of the right to self-determination but rather could be built on more nuanced interpretations of statehood and sovereignty. (...) What can be predicted (...) is that the EU will play a leading role in determining the outcome of Flemish, Scottish and Catalan nationalist claims. The right to self-determination as currently understood in international law provides little in the way of guidance for addressing separatist claims in Europe's stateless nations or, for that matter, in other parts of the world. (...) In Europe (...) self-determination claims will increasingly be dealt with through the institutions of the EU, as part of the ongoing push and pull among the EU, its member states and sub-state regions. Whether this results in 'Independence in Europe' or some form of accommodation short of secession remains to be seen.

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