



Austerity Policies and Gender Impacts In Hungary

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The current political situation

The conservative coalition of Fidesz and KDNP¹ has used its two-thirds majority gained in parliament in the elections of April 2010 to weaken democratic institutions and civil rights. One of the most important signs of this undemocratic turn has been the introduction of a new Constitution without the agreement of the opposition. The “Fundamental Law” reflects a (neo-)conservative worldview, including nationalist and Christian statements and a conservative definition of the family. As a further symptom of neglected democratic institutions, the Fundamental Law itself has been modified several times since its acceptance in April 2011. “Cardinal laws” [sarkalatos törvények] have been accepted on various economic and policy fields; these are to be modified only by a two-thirds majority, thus binding the hands of forthcoming governments.

Although there have been demonstrations and political actions against undemocratic measures and also the backlash of gender equality issues, they have not provoked major changes in the politics of the conservative cabinet, which has kept its leading role among political forces through anti-European rhetoric as well as populist promises, including the recent reduction of communal costs to families. (This measure is a direct interference with market prices, making it compulsory for utility companies to reduce prices by 10 per cent.) The coalition increasingly plays on anti-Roma and anti-Semitic sentiments and gives concessions to the extreme right-wing party Jobbik, which is the second-biggest force in opposition after the Socialist Party (MSZP).

Economic and social policies applied as reactions to the crisis since October 2008

Hungary was hit hard by the economic crisis: its GDP fell by almost 8 per cent between 2008 and 2009 and has been stagnating or decreasing since then (Central Statistical Office, henceforth referred to as KSH, 2012). Compared to the other Visegrád countries, Hungary exhibited a more severe decrease of the GDP and a slower recovery, partly due to the economic slowdown experienced well before the global economic crisis

¹ Fidesz (Young Democrats' Alliance-Hungarian Civic Union) was a liberal party from its formation in 1988 until the mid-1990s, when it took a conservative turn and became the strongest force on the right. The smaller coalition partner is the Christian Democratic People's Party, KDNP.

(Bálint et. al. 2011:18).

While most OECD countries exhibited an increase in social spending in real terms after the outbreak of the crisis (mainly due to rising spending on unemployment benefits, child benefits and means-tested social assistance), Hungary is one of the few countries with a decrease in all the crisis years. Real public social spending fell by 9 per cent between 2008 and 2010, and by a further 4 per cent between 2010 and 2012, a 13 per cent decrease altogether compared to the level of 2008 – actually a drop similar to the one that Greece has gone through (OECD 2012, Chart 2). Despite increasing unemployment and poverty, the Socialist Party abandoned its anti-poverty programme and introduced a workfare programme in 2008; the interim government of Gordon Bajnai froze family allowances and all forms of social assistance, while it also tightened the eligibility criteria in 2009, and this was continued by the conservative cabinet after 2010; thus social assistance and universal benefit levels had lost 20 per cent of their real value by 2012.

Resources devoted to employment services, as well as the number of staff have been severely cut, and training programmes have been discontinued (Elek and Scharle 2012). The period of eligibility for insurance-based unemployment benefit was drastically reduced from nine to three months by Fidesz in 2010, which is currently the shortest period in the EU. Meanwhile the inefficient and punishing public works programme has gained an increasing share, becoming the only “activating tool” by 2013.

Cuts carried out by the current conservative government have partly been driven by the government’s will to get out of the EU’s Excessive Deficit Procedure by means of a reduction of the budget deficit to a level below 3 per cent. With this aim, several austerity packages were issued, including all areas of welfare, health, public and higher education and the complete social insurance system. VAT was raised to 27 per cent (currently the highest within the EU), special taxes were introduced (such as a telecommunication tax and a tax on all bank transfers). As a central element of the government’s economic policy, a single-rate personal income tax (PIT) system was introduced in 2011, set at the level of 16 per cent, with the aim of boosting employment and consumption – without much success. At the same time, the new taxation system, coupled with an extremely high level of child-related tax allowances, favours better-off families at the expense of the poor (see below).

The impact of austerity on women’s labour market participation

A steady decrease in employment rates followed the outbreak of the economic crisis, exhibiting 54.5 per cent in 2010 in the 15-64-year-old population – an astonishingly low level not only if compared to the EU 27 but also within the Visegrád group (Bálint et. al. 2011:19). An increase due to the public works programme has occurred since then, and thus the employment rate reached 56.6 per cent by early 2013 (KSH 2013).

The private sector has continued to be dominated by men (61.7 per cent in 2009) and the public sector by women (66.3 per cent) (Frey 2011:27). According to Köllő (2012), the two sectors responded to the crisis in different ways: while the private sector reacted with lay-offs, the public sector did so by freezing or reducing wages and freezing staff levels. This means that women were more affected by cuts in their wages, whereas men were more affected by lay-offs, at least in the first two years of the crisis (Bálint et. al. 2011). As Frey notes, when referring to this period, "Men lost their jobs in a larger share than women, and this is not a Hungarian but a general European phenomenon" (2011:23). However, in the second phase of the crisis, from 2010, lay-offs and freezes of staff levels in the public sector also became typical, and thus employment decreased in this sector too. This is not fully reflected in the statistics, because public workers are not counted as "unemployed" but as "public sector employees".

Women's presence on the labour market has constantly been much lower than that of men in Hungary. The employment rate of men was 62.5 per cent in 2012 and 52.1 per cent for women. The rate of women among all the employed slightly increased between 2008 and 2010 – due to the processes that we described above – but then decreased again, from 46.5 per cent to 46.0 in 2011 (Bálint 2012, Tables 3.5, 3.6).

There has been an increase in atypical and part-time employment in Hungary following the outbreak of the crisis, exhibiting 6.5 per cent altogether in 2012 (KSH Statat, 2013, Table 7.2.4), including a sharp increase in the case of women from 5.8 per cent in 2008 to 7.1 per cent in 2009, and to 9.2 per cent in 2011 (KSH 2013 Chart 5.1). This has been, however, a fraction of the rates within the EU 27, where altogether 19 per cent of people work part-time, mainly women. According to Frey (2011), it is true that fewer women have paid jobs in Hungary than in the EU; however, if they do, they work longer hours. Thus, if we calculate the number of working hours, Hungary lags behind the EU 27 only by 1.5 per cent.

The unemployment rate of women, which was lower than that of men between the 1990s and the mid-2000s partly due to the generous parental leave schemes, exceeded male

unemployment rates in 2004 and remained higher until the negative effects of the crisis reached the labour market. Thus 12.4 per cent of men and 11.0 per cent of women were unemployed in early 2013 (KSH 2013), a slight increase compared to the previous years (11.6 per cent and 10.7 per cent in 2011 respectively). Certainly, the greatest losers in the case of both sexes have been those with a primary education or no education, but the unemployment rate of women demonstrates an even steeper increase: for men with a primary education or no education the rate was 19.8 per cent in 2008 and 25 per cent in 2011, whereas for women of the same group the respective values are 17.5 and 24.3 per cent (Bálint, 2012: 349).

Women's net earnings amounted to 89.5 per cent of men's earnings in 2008 and 86.1 per cent in 2011 partly as a result of the freezing of public sector wages (KSH 2013: 131). The non-adjusted gender pay gap increased during the crisis years and was 18 per cent in 2011, slightly higher than the EU average (Eurostat 2012). Hungary is one of the few EU member states (along with Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania and Finland) where the gender pay gap is considerably higher in the public than in the private sector (20.5 per cent and 15.3 per cent, respectively), due to the segregation of women in the lower paid ranks of the public sphere (Koncz 2011).

The National Reform Programme of Hungary (2012), reporting on the country's progress towards reaching the targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy, explains the intention of the government to compensate for the loss of wages caused not only by the crisis but also by stopping the tax credit of low-wage earners from 2011 and increasing employers' social insurance contributions from the same year. In reality, employers often reacted by laying off workers, or, especially in the case of women, changing full-time to "quasi-part-time" positions where remuneration is provided for part-time work while employees continue to work full-time, or they receive an "official" salary for 4 or 6 hours and the rest is paid "under the table" with no social security coverage (EWL 2012: 14). Opening up new opportunities for part-time employment might be considered a positive step in general, but this measure works to reduce women's economic independence in Hungary, given the generally low wages.

The rights and security of employees have decreased following the new Labour Code, accepted in 2012. It made it easier for employers to fire women when they return from paid parental leave (Kollonay 2012). The so-called Start Programmes that have been in effect since the mid-2000s work for the promotion of employment through subsidising social insurance contributions of those entering the labour market after a long absence,

including mothers after parental leaves. However, employees are often fired after the subsidised period is over, and employers (including public ones) tend to take new workers, again promoted by the Start Programme for a year or two. Such measures are thus inefficient for the long-term labour market integration also in the case of women (Fazekas and Scharle 2012).

Gendered impact of cutbacks in services and benefits

The level of **social assistance**, already frozen by the socialist Bajnai cabinet in 2009, has been reduced from a monthly 28,500 HUF (100 EUR) to 22,700 HUF (80 EUR) in order to “urge activation” – an amount covering about one quarter of the official “subsistence level”. A recent piece of legislation forbids access to social assistance for more than one person within the family, pushing poor families into a devastating situation. Meanwhile, eligibility for both unemployment insurance and social assistance has become linked to at least one month of public work. The replacement of civil servants, including school administrators, cleaning staff and so on, by cheaper and unprotected public workers has also become widespread, affecting women to a great extent (Ombudsman for Fundamental Rights 2012).

Early retirement pensions were stopped and the basic rule became that no one can receive old age pensions under the age of 62 after 2012. However, an exception is made in the case of women with 40 contributory years. Interestingly enough, years of higher education do not count as contributory years, whereas time spent on maternity and parental leave does, reflecting the preference of the cabinet for women’s caring roles. This measure attempts to link pro-natalist family policy aims (caring for one’s own children and caring for the grandchildren) with the old age pension system.

The **family policies** of the Orbán government exhibited a new, reverse, pattern of redistribution. The introduction of the extremely generous family tax allowance explicitly supports better-off families at the expense of the poor. A family with one or two children now pays 10,000 HUF/month/child (35.7 EUR) less tax, and a family with three or more children has gained 33,000 HUF/month for each child (117 EUR) (Inglot et al. 2012). To be able to utilise the maximum of a tax allowance, a gross income close to 500,000 HUF (1,600 EUR, twice the average income) was needed in 2012. As the previously existing compensation for low-income earners was stopped, low-income earners, altogether about 40 per cent of people (including families with children), thus lost out, and another 40 per

cent (those in the higher ranks of the income scale) gained through the new taxation and tax allowance system, while 20 per cent (in the middle) experienced no significant change. Single mothers fare poorly due to the new legislation, as their income is lower than that of families with two earners or a single-income family where the husband has a high income. This might have an effect on women who are thinking about getting divorced. In the case that the children remain with them, they will be eligible for the tax allowance. However, if their income is much lower than that of their husbands they might lose a large amount of money after their divorce. This means that the new legislation can work to keep married couples together through financial incentives, increasing the economic dependence of women on their husbands.

According to the programme of Fidesz (2007), mothers would have a “choice” whether to stay at home with their children or return to employment – an idea limiting women’s roles to being either carers or wage earners. In reality, however, the Orbán government prefers the caring role of mothers, which also shows the strength of the smaller coalition partner KDNP in family-related issues: they explicitly argue for traditional gender roles in their programme (KDNP 2008). One of the first measures of the new government was to restore the three-year-long universal parental leave (GYES) after the socialist Bajnai government cut it to two years as part of the 2009 austerity measures. The level of payments has not been indexed since 2009, demonstrating the neglect by successive cabinets of the economic situation of mothers who take care of their children at home. Meanwhile, the mere five days of paid “daddy leave” have not been extended.

Attendance in **nurseries** (for under-three-year olds) has stayed around 10-11 per cent, far from the Barcelona targets of the EU (33 per cent). A new legislation now allows local governments to ask for a higher co-payment from parents in public nurseries. 54.5 per cent of nurseries decided to introduce this payment in 2012 (BDDSZ 2012). The government, at the same time, prefers smaller, so-called “family daycare centres” [családi napközi], where parents’ contribution is much higher than in the case of public nurseries.

Both tendencies show the government’s intention to put the burden of care for under-3-year-old children on families, which in practice means, in the case of low-income families, who are not able to pay the fees, considering the prevailing unequal distribution of care responsibilities within Hungarian families, on mothers. Long waiting lists in public nurseries indicate that there is a demand for this service, to which poor and Roma families rarely get access.

The effects of the above described austerity measures and (neo)conservative

changes in the Hungarian welfare system have been harsh. The poverty rate increased from 12.3 per cent in 2010 to 13.8 per cent in 2011 (KSH 2012a). Young and middle-aged women face especially difficult times. The **poverty rate** of 18-24-year-old women was as high as 20.9 per cent, as compared to 16.9 per cent of men, in 2011. Also, poverty in old age is more of a concern for women: 5 per cent of women and 3.5 per cent of men over 65 years of age were poor in 2011 (KSH 2013:157). Statistics also show that part-time workers are not protected from poverty in Hungary: 16.7 per cent were poor in 2011, which is the same ratio as for those who were not employed (KSH 2012a). Children are at the highest risk of poverty. Their poverty rate increased from 20.3 to 23 per cent between 2010 and 2011 (KSH 2012a). Every third family with three or more children is poor, a similar rate to single-parent families, 90 per cent of which are headed by women (Ibid).

While there has been an increase of inequalities between families and between the income of women and men, there also has been a growth of inequalities between partners. Research shows a shift in the internal distribution of unpaid work within families, and a growth in the cases of domestic violence. It is a general phenomenon that non-working men do less household than working women (OECD 2011). The research of Czibere (2012), conducted among families living in extreme poverty, or “deep poverty” indicates that Hungarian men who lost their jobs stop doing even those household duties which they did earlier. Men in poor families seem to maintain up their prestige by leaving the house in the morning and returning late in the evening even if they are workless (Czibere 2012:130). In those cases when both partners are unemployed, “women do not share their duties with men, neither do men take on any work that is considered to be a woman’s job” (ibid: 181). The majority of women who have been interviewed reported that they have been abused and have been subjected to violence. Such cases are most frequent in families where women work and men are jobless. Women living in deep poverty also report anxiety and psychiatric illnesses such as depression (ibid: 188). Although the effects of the crisis have not been analysed by this study, it seems likely that long-term unemployment and deep poverty, caused by the crisis and by the severe cuts in the unemployment benefit and social assistance system since 2008, increased violence and self-destruction, which affects women in such families to an increasing extent.

The explicit or implicit gender order behind the applied policies

Previous socialist governments (2002-2010) **implicitly** strengthened traditional gender roles, because they did not efficiently foster women's labour market participation, kept long parental leaves in place, and at the same time failed to significantly increase the number of places in public childcare institutions. They were also reluctant to effectively further women's presence in political decision-making. The current conservative government, at the same time, **explicitly** aims at fostering segregated gender roles where women are carers and men are breadwinners. Conservative gender ideology has been enacted in the new Fundamental Law, which states that "Hungary shall protect the institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman" because the family is "the basis of the nation's survival". Such a definition not only prevents marriage between same-sex couples but also discriminates against heterosexual cohabiting couples and their children in social rights and inheritance, which is now included in the Fundamental Law, following its fourth amendment.

The above examples illustrate how Fidesz and its smaller coalition partner KDNP explicitly force (neo)conservative, Christian ideological values upon an overwhelmingly non-religious society.² As these values have been laid down in the Constitution, all acts, including economic, social and family policies, have to comply. Women are put in an inferior position inside and outside the family as patriarchal power relations are promoted.

Although no legislation to ban abortion has been issued yet, the possibility is there, as the Fundamental Law states that "embryonic and foetal life shall be subject to protection from the moment of conception". Abortion, meanwhile, has been stigmatised, not least through a poster campaign of the government, partly financed from EU Structural Funds (UN 2013: 8).

² The big churches lost about a quarter of their followers in the last decade, according to the 2011 census, which shows that about 40 per cent of the population belongs to the Catholic Church, and 11 per cent to the Reformed Church. More detailed studies indicate that "belonging to a church" does not mean religious practice: just 9 per cent of people go to church on a weekly basis, and the majority of religious people only practise their religion occasionally (Rosta 2011).

Assessment of gender mainstreaming structures and their impact on policy-making, with regard to the applied measures

There has been no public debate, let alone social dialogue or discussion with the affected parties or civil organisations about the austerity measures and the vast changes (“reforms”) introduced in all policy fields, including economic, social, cultural, educational policies, since 2010. There was no reconciliation between the government and other political and civil forces in issues affecting women, and we cannot talk about gender mainstreaming of social or other policies since the conservative cabinet gained power.

The National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality 2010–2021 was agreed upon by the previous, socialist government, and this Strategy has been followed only on paper by the conservatives. The recent review of the United Nations’ Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee), based on alternative reports of civil organisations, states that the Hungarian government’s “orientation may represent a regressive approach to gender roles” and that “this orientation increases prevalence of gender stereotypes by portraying women mainly, if not exclusively, in the role of mothers and caregivers” (UN 2013:2). The Committee notes that the Council for Social Equality among Women and Men (a consultative body that included the most relevant women’s organisations) has been disbanded and thus consultation between the government and women’s organisations and gender experts has been stopped.

The governmental body that deals with such issues, including “reconciliation of family duties and paid employment”, is now the Department of Family Policy within the Ministry of Human Resources; this, however, lacks both financial and human resources. Meanwhile, the issue of women’s employment has been delegated to the Ministry of the National Economy, which launched a programme on the “fertility boom among the middle class”.

While the neglect of equal opportunities is a key to the conservative government’s ideological framework, centralisation of the decision-making process within the government, giving the Ministry of Finance extra power, also works against women’s rights: centralised and arbitrary decision-making processes, where only men are in key positions, exclude women from crucial fields of politics and policy-making. Furthermore, such practices naturalise the patriarchal, top-down culture of decision-making also in the “lower” fields of politics and everyday life. The European Women’s Lobby argues that there has been a backlash in all areas concerned, including the participation of women in

politics (EWL 2013). Certainly, Hungary today exhibits the lowest share of female MPs within the EU, with no more than 8.8 per cent. The regulation of trafficking and prostitution has been modified to further penalise women who suffer from these practices (EWL 2013).

Accepting legislation that fosters the division of gender roles and does not promote equal opportunities for women and men is clearly against the gender strategy of the EU. Gender mainstreaming and equal opportunities for women and men have been taken off of the agenda, and the related department in the Ministry of Human Resources has been discontinued. The government, instead, has been lobbying for “family mainstreaming”, promoting the “traditional family” on the European level as well (Juhász 2012; Ingot et. al. 2012).

The neoliberal approach to deal with the crisis from a feminist perspective

We can identify three parallel processes since the outbreak of the crisis. First, the increased economic uncertainty of people has been a “natural” effect of the credit crunch and lay-offs. Furthermore, the weakening of the Hungarian Forint made hundreds of thousands of people bankrupt in the country due to their debts in CHF or Euro. The second process has been the inability of the Hungarian state to cushion the effects of the crisis and protect the most vulnerable groups of society. As we have demonstrated in this paper, social policy measures increased the negative effects of the crisis through extreme cuts in unemployment benefits and social assistance. The third process has involved the centralisation of political power since 2010 and a (neo)conservative backlash in all fields, including social and family policies. The three processes together have increased poverty and inequalities, leading to frightening signs of disintegration. Differences have grown not only between social classes but also between women and men and between Roma and non-Roma Hungarians. The employment of women is a low priority of the agenda of the conservative government, which prefers to see women in caring roles. The exploitation of women within the families has increased, due to the higher share of domestic labour that they have been doing since the outbreak of the crisis, and also due to increased abuse and violence against them and the lack of sufficient legal tools to tackle this issue. Political centralisation, which places men in key positions of decision-making, coupled with patriarchal and arbitrary modes of decision-making, reduces women’s chances of making their voices heard and acting to change political and social structures that work against

them.

Alternatives to deal with the crisis and topics for discussion

The most important prerequisite for a change in the above described trends would be the restoration of democratic decision-making processes, including public debates and social dialogue between the political elite and civil organisations. The preoccupation with the 3 per cent deficit rate, both on the part of the EU and on the part of the current Hungarian government, creates an unnecessary obstacle to measures that could cushion the effects of the crisis and provide a possibility of sustainable economic and social development. Simple austerity measures should be replaced by a long-term strategy that views education, including early childcare, as central for economic and social sustainability. Poverty rates and income inequalities could and should be reduced through the reallocation of existing resources. I hereby propose six related points for discussion:

1. Long parental leaves should be reduced, with a parallel development of childcare facilities for under-3-year-olds. Complex programmes are needed where care for children is coupled with the empowering of parents (e.g. Children's Houses) and promoting the employment of mothers with a lower level of education.
2. Governments should promote the increased involvement of men in unpaid domestic work, including childcare. Fathers' leave should be extended even at the "expense" of long leaves taken almost exclusively by mothers.
3. Part-time employment, while keeping women in an inferior position both on the labour market and in the family, provides very low income in the Hungarian circumstances. For low-income groups, part-time (as opposed to full-time) employment usually means a sharp decrease in their living standards, especially if part-time work means 60 or 50 per cent of full-time working hours.
4. Employment policies should be redesigned so that they could provide an opportunity for (re)integration into the labour market. Research indicates that training programmes and increased capacities and quality assurance of job centres would promote employment. Resources should be reallocated from the public works programme to active labour market policies. Only this could provide an

opportunity to increase the employment of women with low levels of education.

5. Women should be effectively included in political decision-making processes, at all levels of the state but especially in the central administration. Substantive representation of women should be ensured in order to bring about reforms for more gender equality in all policy fields. The possibility of a gender quota should again be put on the agenda.
6. Linear taxation should be replaced by a progressive personal income tax. Tax allowances should be cut for high earners, while the level of universal family allowance, parental leave and social assistance should be substantially increased. This would not only be a fairer distribution of wealth between poor and rich families, but would also contribute to the more equal share of resources between men and women. Importantly, such a reallocation of resources would reduce the poverty of single parents, who are overwhelmingly mothers.

Capacities to generate gender-sensitive alternatives: hubs, institutions, prospects

Although the ban on social rights and the weakening of democratic institutions have raised strong concerns and provoked criticism inside and outside the country (including the highest ranks of the EU), the government has not reacted with any change in its politics. The opposition has become fragmented and thus too weak to propose an alternative that would attract the masses, while Fidesz – despite losing almost half of its earlier electorate – has remained the most popular political force as of April 2013. The Socialist Party, often criticising the (neo)conservative governance of Fidesz, has promised to stop linear taxation and to provide a more equal distribution of welfare in the event that they win the elections in 2014. The small green party LMP [Politics Can Be Different], which has recently been divided into two parties (LMP and PM – Dialogue for Hungary), has had the strongest programme promoting gender equality, childcare services and women’s labour market participation (LMP 2010) and proposed related legislation. A detailed social policy programme has been developed for the Haza és Haladás [Nation and Progress] Foundation, backing the newly formed party Együtt 2014 [E2014 – Together 2014] and the recent agreement between Együtt 2014 and PM lays down their main social policy theses,

including gender-related issues, such as stopping discrimination against same-sex couples, the increase of childcare facilities and the protection of victims of domestic violence (Együtt 2014, 2013).

Several civil organisations have raised awareness against austerity and the backlash concerning gender roles and (neo)conservative values in Hungary. The Hungarian Women's Lobby constantly monitors those measures of the government affecting gender equality. Patent Association [Association against Patriarchy] has evaluated the situation regarding sexual rights and has provided in-depth analysis as well as a consultation opportunity on abortion rights in Hungary. NANE Women's Rights Association has continued to support victims of domestic violence and organise awareness-raising campaigns. A new formation called "Women's Rebel" was created on Facebook, following the sexist statements of a KDNP politician when discussing the legal framework of domestic violence in parliament in the new Penal Code. Activists of this group managed to put pressure on the government on this issue and continue to organise demonstrations and flashmobs. A promising tendency in the new political arena is shown by the fact that the opposition civil organisation Milla [One Million People for a Free Press in Hungary] has always had women as key speakers on their demonstrations, a new phenomenon in the history of Hungarian demonstrations since the late 1980s. The new liberal, left and students' movements, including "The City is for All" [A Város Mindenkié] or the "Students' Network" [Hallgatói Hálózat] demonstrate more gender sensitivity than the traditional political forces, such as major parties and trade unions. The above movements, as well as "Humán Platform", a new organisation unifying networks of social workers, artists, teachers and nurses, keep demonstrating against austerity in a new way. They link the issue of social and gender inequality to the weakening of democratic institutions and argue that a democratic society needs inclusion and equality.

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