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INTRODUCTION

Global governance at present can be described as an amalgam of neoliberalism and shifting multilateral global governance (CBC, 2026) in which power is contested and reconfigured across multiple sites (Zürn, 2018). In this landscape, social policies such as migration governance are frequently presented as neutral, technical, and necessary responses to ostensibly objective threats (Bigo, 2002). This essay argues that such policies are not merely reactive instruments but are deeply embedded within ideological frameworks that construct ‘discourses of danger’ (Campbell 1992, 1998; Weldes 1996 cited in Huysmans, 2002, p. 7). Against this backdrop, neoliberalism operates as dominant ideology that obfuscates structural inequalities through its seemingly neutral managerial discourse (Harvey, 2005). The current shifts toward multipolarity and polycentrism (EUISS, 2012) are reconfiguring how these inequalities are managed (Thiel, 2023).

Language, cognitive framing, and communicative power play crucial roles in shaping the perception of danger (Esses *et al.*, 2013) to ‘create public acceptance’ (Bernays, 1928, p. 18) for the creation of coercive policies. Drawing on Huysmans’ conception of securitization as a multidimensional practice of governmentality (Huysmans, 2006), as well as insights from linguistic relativity (Whorf, 1956), and Spivak’s critique of epistemic authority (Spivak, 1988), this essay foregrounds how ideological drivers operate through both material and discursive mechanisms (Gramsci, 1971). I proceed by historicizing the rise and consolidation of neoliberal hegemony before describing the current multipolar and polycentric shifts in the world order. A brief overview of corporate and transnational elite power will be given before I interrogate the discursive mechanisms which occlude policy choices (Foucault, 1991). I then introduce six analytical lenses which will be applied to explore two case studies on migration management: the European Union (EU)-Turkey migration externalization arrangement and Uganda’s multilateral refugee response partnerships with the EU and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I will conclude by summarizing this essay’s main arguments and offering practical suggestions and ideas for further research.

NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism did not emerge *ex nihilo*, it developed out of classical liberal thought, which foregrounds liberty, universal rights, and market primacy while circumscribing which subjects benefit from universality (Young, 2011). Early liberal thinkers made clear who their ideals

applied to the presumed liberal subject was male, white, and property-owning (Locke, 1960; Mills, 1867). This idea of universalism created a mode of selective obfuscation at the discursive level by deciding who was worthy of rights and privilege. In a sense, universalism functioned as ‘an *idée-force*’ (idea-force) (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 238) which mobilized certain groups while demobilizing others by enabling policies which deepened social and economic exclusion.

The emergence of neoliberalism in the 1980s through Xiaoping, Reagan, and Thatcher (Harvey, 2005) institutionalized market logics within governance processes (Dutta *et al.*, 2021). These practices present policy choices as technical, market-based solutions, and in doing so they depoliticize distributive conflicts while masking underlying structural power relations (Brown, 2015).

Neoliberalism’s power rests on its rhetorical claim to neutrality. By presenting inequality as the outcome of impersonal market forces, it presents political decisions as inevitable market outcomes (Stiglitz, 2002). Neoliberal logics are reinforced through global financial systems and everyday governance practices that favor numbers and expert voices (Roosevelt Institute, 2024).

Foucault’s concept of governmentality clarifies how these neoliberal practices become normalized by shaping the conditions of thought and action (Foucault, 1991). In doing so, it privileges technical expertise and routine decision-making processes over debate and discussion (Jahn, 2021).

SHIFTS IN THE MULTILATERAL CONTEXT

The post–Cold War multilateral order is being remade as authority spreads across an increasingly dense mix of state and non-state actors (Acharya, 2014). Multipolarity describes how power is distributed among several centers, while polycentrism refers to overlapping governance nodes, such as regional organizations, transnational firms, and expert networks, which operate side by side without a single coordinating authority (EUISS 2012). These transformations have expanded the number of actors who can contest, reinterpret, or resist neoliberal prescriptions and introduce heterogeneity into normative contestation (Stephen, 2017).

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is an example of this emerging multipolarity. Its members differ ideologically, from state-led capitalism in China to more market-oriented models in India and Brazil, yet the grouping provides a forum to push back

against Western institutional dominance and to advance alternative ideas about sovereignty and development (Petry and Nölke, 2024). The group's expansion brought together diverse governance models and shared concerns about economic autonomy and institutional reform (Council on Foreign Relations 2025). BRICS is not a unified anti-Western bloc but a pragmatic coalition whose members advance particular interests while leaving wider market logics intact (Hopewell 2026). Multipolarity and polycentrism give the Global South greater room to maneuver, for example by creating alternative finance architectures through the New Development Bank (NDB 2019), selective refusal to implement extraterritorial measures, or reframing normative claims in multilateral fora (Armijo 2007). Dispersing authority across multiple centers does not automatically produce fairer outcomes: transnational elites and corporations continue to occupy influential positions in these networks and often shape decisions in ways that reproduce existing inequalities (Ralston and Taggart 2025). Multipolarity thus reconfigures power rather than simply democratizing it (Barnett and Duvall, 2005).

MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL ELITES

The rise of multinational corporations (MNCs) and transnational elites has created an extraterritorial governance capacity which complicates state-centric authority. Regulatory arbitrage, offshore financial structures, and corporate lobbying enable capital to circumvent domestic constraints (Zucman, 2015). Concentrated economic power translates into transnational political influence as corporate actors participate in standard setting, public-private partnerships, and the operational delivery of migration management through detention services and biometric systems (Andersson, 2014). This entanglement of private power and public authority means that decision making increasingly occurs in spaces that lack democratic oversight and are governed by contractual secrecy (Fasel and Weerts, 2025). Thus, multipolarity might seem to disperse state power even as it privileges actors whose resources enable them to shape policy through technical expertise and financial leverage (Moon, 2019).

LINGUISTIC SLEIGHT OF HAND

Language plays a central role in constructing insecurity (Esses, V.M., *et al.*, 2013). The role of linguistic categories has been found to shape perception (Skerrett, 2010). Terms such as 'illegal migrant,' 'security threat,' and 'irregular arrival' are not neutral descriptors but performative devices that structure the domain of policy-relevant problems (Huysmans, 2006). Such categorization produces moral and legal definitions of who is deserving of protection versus

who may be excluded or detained (Fassin, 2012). Bernays' concept of engineering consent maps well onto contemporary communicative practices as political elites, media ecosystems, and algorithmic platforms co-produce narratives that galvanise public support for securitizing measures (Bernays, 1928; Huysmans, 2006). Technical language, opaque bureaucratic processes and specialist jargon deepen the problem by putting experts in charge and shutting out the people most affected. In short, linguistic framing and prevailing cognitive biases function as tools of power in migration governance, defining what seems normal and acceptable and closing off alternative perspectives and responses (Bourdieu, 2001).

FRAMING THE LINE OF ENQUIRY

My examination of migration governance will draw on a set of complementary theoretical lenses which allow for a multidimensional understanding of power, identity, and governance.

Intersectionality, first articulated by Crenshaw, describes how overlapping social identities such as race, class, and gender produce distinct forms of disadvantage which cannot be reduced to single-axis explanations (Crenshaw, 1989). Collins and Bilge (2016), emphasize intersectionality's broader usefulness as a framework for analyzing complexity in social and structural inequality (Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Postcolonial theory situates contemporary power relations within the enduring legacies of colonialism. Edward Said's notion of the 'Other' (1978) describes how Western identity has historically been constructed through hierarchical differentiation, with lasting implications for representation and authority (Quijano, 2000). Bhabha and Spivak further describe the contingent, hybrid nature of identity and the marginalization of subaltern voices within dominant epistemic frameworks (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988).

Complexity theory shifts attention to the non-linear and emergent properties of political systems by conceptualizing governance as the outcome of interactions within dynamic and interdependent networks (Cairney and Geyer, 2017). This perspective questions the idea that policy can be centrally controlled and instead highlights the importance of adaptation and contingency.

Polycentrism complements this view by highlighting the diffusion of authority across multiple, overlapping centers of power (Thiel, 2023). Rather than a singular hierarchy, governance operates through diverse actors and institutions engaged in dynamic processes of agenda-setting and coordination (Acharya, 2014). Multiplexity adds to this by showing how overlapping social

and institutional ties build trust, enable cooperation, and create constraints across interconnected networks (Fisher-Onar and Roy, 2026).

Finally, Barnett and Duvall's multidimensional framework (2005) conceptualizes power as operating simultaneously across coercive, institutional, structural, and productive dimensions. The framework encompasses both direct forms of control, as well as the discursive production of meaning and subjectivity. These different forms of power and authority interact across levels and can reinforce or contradict one another, leading to complex and sometimes unintended outcomes (*Ibid.*).

Taken together, these lenses provide a systematic framework for analyzing how neoliberal managerialism is both enabled and contested across contexts, and how language, institutions, and networks interact in the construction of insecurity.

MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

CASE 1: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND TURKEY

The EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016 exemplifies how multipolar negotiation, managerial techniques, and linguistic framing combined to produce an externalized model of migration governance (European Council, 2016). Official EU rhetoric presented the arrangement as a pragmatic fix to *stop the flows* and restore order to the Eastern Mediterranean, with the language of *containment* and *return* framing irregular maritime crossings as problems amenable to administrative solutions (Human Rights Watch, 2025). This framing depoliticized underlying drivers of displacement, including conflict and inequality, and it privileged administrative tools such as hotspot processing, readmission frameworks, and conditional funding over rights based imperatives (Carta *et al.*). Intersectional analysis has uncovered differentiated impacts for women, children, and LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, who have encountered unique protection barriers within accelerated procedures and hotspot environments (Ekmekçi, 2024). A multidimensional power analysis helps to surface the constellation of actors involved, including EU institutions, member states, Turkish authorities, Frontex, NGOs, and private contractors (Douo *et al.*). Coercive practices, including returns and detention, have operated parallel to humanitarian reception centers, demonstrating how governance outcomes can emerge from layered authority (European Parliament, 2018). Postcolonial critique highlights how externalization reinscribed hierarchies: EU outsourcing leveraged Turkey's geopolitical position and financial dependence, reproducing historic asymmetries in which Global North

actors externalize burdens to proximate Global South jurisdictions (Mbembe, 2019). Complexity theory helps to explain emergent outcomes by demonstrating non-linear adaptation by migratory networks; reductions in recorded sea arrivals, for example, did not equate to resolved displacement drivers, but rather led to route diversification and increased irregularity elsewhere (European Council, 2026). The process unfolded within a polycentric governance environment in which authority was dispersed across overlapping formal and informal channels (Keohane, 2002). EU–Turkey cooperation combined financial incentives, diplomatic negotiation, and securitized coordination, while a wider set of actors, including NGOs and commercial carriers, shaped operational outcomes through providing services, reporting, or implementing contracts (Erdil and Akçomak, 2020). In addition, conditional funding influenced domestic Turkish policy as it altered regional migration trajectories and reconfigured the operating space for civil society actors, thereby extending the policy effects beyond immediate border management tasks (Muftuler-Bac, 2021).

Human rights organizations report persistent procedural deficits, including limited access to asylum processes and accelerated returns without adequate safeguards, showing how managerial expedients can erode protection standards (Amnesty International, 2020). Studies have found that hotspot practices concentrate decision-making in spaces with weak legal aid, producing an interiorization of securitized logics within administrative routines (UNHCR, 2017). Public discourse framed migration as a ‘crisis,’ a construction that legitimized emergency measures and eased their rapid adoption (Huysmans, 2006). In that way, discourse did not merely describe policy but created the conditions that made coercive administrative practices intelligible and politically acceptable (*ibid.*). The hotspot model relied heavily on biometric systems and fast-track procedures supplied by private vendors, a reliance that shifted lines of responsibility and introduced market incentives into core protection tasks (Newstrail, 2025). Oversight gaps followed where transnational and corporate actors operated across jurisdictions, complicating accountability for rights violations and procedural failures (van Riemsdijk *et al.* 2020). Human rights monitors recorded that procedural compression produced both mistaken returns and prolonged limbo for many claimants, outcomes that managerial metrics did not register as policy failure (EuroMed Rights, 2024).

The 2016 Statement sits at the intersection of immediate pressures and longer-term institutional change. Between 2014 and 2015 crossings in the Eastern Mediterranean and associated fatalities rose sharply, and high-profile shipwrecks produced intense media attention and

political mobilization across EU member states; these short-term urgencies coincided with deeper constraints such as post-2008 fiscal austerity, the rise of right-wing populism, and a broader institutional turn toward securitized border management in the EU (UNHCR Europe, 2024). As a result, the Statement acted both as a crisis response and as a site of policy innovation, shaped by an institutional repertoire inclined toward technocratic, measurable interventions (Shore and Wright, 2015). The choice to deploy hotspot centers, formalize readmission arrangements and tie assistance to conditional disbursements followed familiar governance templates that privilege managerial expediency and quantifiable outputs over deliberative or redistributive remedies (Dutta *et al.*, 2021).

The operational architecture of the EU–Turkey arrangement reflects how managerialism and technocracy depoliticized migration. Managerialism, the transfer of private-sector performance logics into public administration, organized the arrangement around targets, throughput, and contractual delivery. Technocratic expertise justified fast-track procedures and biometric registration as neutral, technical fixes rather than value-laden choices (Zucman, 2015). These tendencies narrowed the policy horizon: migration became framed as a problem of efficient movement management, and acceptable solutions were limited to those that could be measured or outsourced (Shore and Wright, 2015). Consequently, approaches that address root causes, pursue structural redistribution, or expand protection pathways lost out, as seen in the prioritization of hotspot processing and readmission frameworks over substantive asylum safeguards (Ulusoy, 2025). Foucault’s concept of governmentality clarifies how such managerial techniques produce subjects and practices oriented toward compliance with administratively defined norms rather than toward legal-political claims for rights (Foucault, 1991).

Hotspot processing and fast-track procedures changed front-line decision making (UNHCR, 2017). Under severe time and space pressures, caseworkers faced incentives to favor speed and numbers, which produced shortened interviews, limited legal help and the use of blunt indicators to judge credibility (Terry, 2021). Certain groups suffered most: women with sexual and gender-based vulnerabilities, unaccompanied children and LGBTQ+ claimants often encountered particular obstacles to protection (Cleton and Scuzzarello, 2024). Biometric systems and linked databases eased identification and readmission, but outsourcing technologies and services to private companies created contracts that frequently curtailed liability and reduced transparency, drawing market actors into core protection tasks and

narrowing routes for redress (Ambroso, 2022). The result was fewer recorded sea arrivals alongside shifted burdens, compressed procedures and serious epistemic harms for claimants, problems that managerial indicators did not register as policy failure (Nordic Monitor, 2025).

The EU–Turkey model operated through a polycentric assemblage of EU agencies, member states, Turkish authorities, international organizations, local NGOs, and private contractors, producing operational flexibility but also a diffusion of responsibility (Bigo, 2002). When rights violations or procedural failures occurred, the multiplicity of actors complicated redress: contractual confidentiality, divergent mandates, and the transnational nature of operations created obstacles to effective accountability (Ulusoy, 2025). The arrangement’s reliance on conditional funding and diplomatic leverage reconfigured Turkish behavior—acceptance of operational roles was substantially shaped by financial packages and political concessions that in turn affected domestic policymaking and civil society space—reproducing asymmetries in which wealthier actors externalized responsibilities while retaining normative authority (Terry, 2021).

A complexity-aware perspective shows that counting fewer arrivals obscured wider effects. With closed off, migrants turned to smugglers and moved to other corridors, which produced consequences that policy makers had not intended. A focus on immediate containment without assessment of system-level impacts therefore risked shifting harm across places and over time (UNHCR, n.d.).

CASE 2: UGANDA AND MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

Uganda’s engagement with EU migration governance follows a different pattern: the country wields strategic leverage within polycentric networks rather than serving merely as a passive implementer (WEglobal, 2025). Uganda hosts about 1.9 million refugees and asylum seekers, the largest refugee population in Africa, and its national refugee policy grants refugees freedom of movement and the right to work, strengthening its position in negotiations with international partners (World Food Programme, 2023).

The EU framed support through multi-year partnerships with UNHCR provided flexible funding to bolster local protection and service delivery capacities; these arrangements represented negotiated agreements rather than unilateral imposition (EEAS, 2023). EU contributions backed self-reliance and food security programs in refugee settlements and linked assistance to development and humanitarian objectives aimed at reducing dependency and

expanding livelihood opportunities (UN IOM, 2023). In those negotiated arrangements, Uganda's domestic priorities shaped programmatic choices; national guidelines and collaboration with NGOs targeted differentiated protection for women and children, although resource constraints caused uneven implementation across districts. The Association of Refugee Women in Uganda (2023).

However, the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023, upheld by the Constitutional Court in 2024, has drawn widespread criticism for facilitating discrimination, arrests, evictions, and violence against LGBTQ+ people, and it has increased vulnerability for LGBTQ+ migrants and refugees seeking protection (Sinclair and Sinatti, 2021).

EU support for basic services, livelihoods, and inclusion programs in refugee-hosting areas linked migration governance to welfare goals and gave Ugandan authorities leverage to secure material assistance in exchange for ongoing custodial responsibilities (Save the Children, 2025). Where cooperation occurred, it often depended on material assistance for reception capacities and technical support, which illustrates how sovereignty and institutional capacity function as resources to be mobilized within polycentric systems (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). Uganda's negotiated engagement therefore challenges portrayals of the Global South as passive recipients and instead demonstrates governance as co-produced across overlapping institutional environments (Acharya, 2014).

Uganda's policy environment and refugee-hosting model tangible bargaining assets. By adopting relatively permissive domestic policies, allowing freedom of movement and the right to work, Uganda opened space for development-oriented programs and for leveraging EU and UNHCR support that aligned with national objectives (UNHCR, 2021). Conditional assistance was frequently channeled into livelihood, food-security, and integration programs that bolstered self-reliance through community-level interventions, agricultural inputs, and market access projects (Mastorillo *et al.*, 2024). However, uneven resource distribution and administrative capacity produced variable outcomes across districts and groups. Intersectional vulnerabilities persisted, with women-headed households, out-of-school children, and LGBTQ+ claimants remaining at heightened risk (Bjørkhaug, I. *et al.*, 2025). Progressive national policy did not uniformly translate into protection for all subgroups, and highlights the need for granular implementation analysis (*ibid.*).

The domestic legal landscape, most notably the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023) and its 2024 constitutional validation, illustrates the limits of negotiated external engagement. Despite material support for services and livelihoods, those legal changes produced exclusionary effects that international partners could not counter without risking infringement on sovereignty, showing that external incentives rarely reverse rights-restrictive reforms without explicit, enforced conditions (UNHCR, 2021). Operational cooperation across the EU delegation, UNHCR, and Ugandan ministries created joint planning fora that improved coordination and adaptive learning in some projects, but multiple actors also created coherence challenges: divergent reporting requirements, donor timelines, and accountability frameworks imposed administrative burdens that affected frontline delivery (Ngongi, 2022). The inclusion of civil society and refugee organizations in participatory processes improved responsiveness, while their exclusion deepened epistemic marginalization (UNHCR, 2021).

Regional and multilateral institutions supplied both resources and constraints. Ugandan negotiators invoked African Union frameworks for normative leverage even though those frameworks lack binding enforcement (Ayilo *et al.*, 2025). The resulting governance topology combined technical fixes, political bargaining and normative contestation and yielded hybrid outcomes that were partly protective and partly coercive (Mushomi *et al.*, 2025).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparing the EU–Turkey and Uganda–EU cases shows how managerial tools and linguistic frames, together with positionality, produce different outcomes (Muftuler-Bac, 2021). In the EU–Turkey case, hotspots, readmission agreements, and disbursement-linked funding acted as primary levers of control and eroded procedural protections (Erdil, and Akçomak, 2020). In Uganda on the other hand, conditional assistance more often supported development-focused programs that strengthened local capacities and refugee self-reliance, even as political and legal exclusions persisted for certain groups (EEAS, 2023). Corporate intermediaries held a central role in both settings, embedding market logics in migration governance and complicating avenues for redress (Ugandan Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2024; Terry, 2021). Multipolarity redistributed authority without guaranteeing more democratic or rights-centered outcomes: at times it gave recipient states leverage to secure protections, at other times it allowed externalizers to shift burdens outward while retaining normative claims (Acharya, 2014).

IMPLICATIONS

The comparative evidence yields actionable policy directions. First, migration governance should shift from deterrence and technical containment toward rights-centered pluralism by expanding safe and regular pathways, including humanitarian visas and labor mobility schemes, which can reduce pressure on irregular routes (UNHCR, 2024). Second, institutional reforms must mandate participatory mechanisms that include migrant organizations and local civil society in policy design, and establish independent oversight of externalization arrangements to guard against procedural erosion (Triviño-Salazar and Climent-Ferrando, 2024). Third, regulatory frameworks should require contractual transparency and enforceable standards for private contractors, including mechanisms for judicial remedies, to align commercial incentives with protection obligations (Matuszczyk, 2026). Fourth, policy design must be complexity aware: require ex ante impact assessments that include distributive and epistemic harms, and adopt iterative monitoring to detect non-linear effects and adapt accordingly (Scholten, 2019). Fifth, leverage multipolar institutions to institutionalize burden sharing through regional instruments and multilateral platforms while insisting on human rights compliance, thereby embedding cooperation within normative and accountable frameworks (Lutz and Bachelet, 2026).

Operationalizing these recommendations requires concrete institutional changes. Independent oversight bodies with cross-jurisdictional mandates can clarify accountability lines by auditing contractual clauses, procurement processes, and compliance with protection standards (Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System, n.d.). Mandatory transparency in outsourcing agreements would allow civil society and legal practitioners to identify responsibility chains and pursue remedies (Cliniclegal.org, 2026). Embedding migrant and refugee representation in program governance, not merely in consultative fora but also in decision-making bodies with veto or amendment powers, would address epistemic exclusion (The New Humanitarian, 2025). Ex ante complex systems impact assessments should become a required element of any externalization agreement, as it would allow for plausible adaptive responses and contingency plans for route diversion and downstream harms (RISAP, 2024). Finally, development-oriented support should be decoupled from securitized performance targets where possible to reduce incentives for containment-focused metrics (Bahar *et al.*, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Migration governance functions as an ideological practice in which managerialism, linguistic framing, and polycentric power combine to construct insecurity and legitimize coercive controls (Huysmans, 2006). The EU–Turkey arrangement illustrates how externalization, framed as a technical necessity, produced procedural erosion, and spatialized responsibility beyond European borders (Muftuler-Bac, 2021). Uganda’s negotiated agreement with the EU shows how a Global South state can convert custodial responsibilities and legal practice into bargaining leverage which produces developmentally oriented support, even while political exclusions persist for marginalized groups (WEGlobal, 2025). The six analytical lenses used here reveal that governance outcomes follow from contested ideas, institutional capacities, and relational negotiations rather than from purely technical exigencies, and that durable reform requires rights-centered, accountable, and complexity-sensitive policy design (Global Coalition on Migration, 2017). Taken together, the cases demonstrate that multipolarity and polycentrism reconfigure but do not inherently overturn neoliberal managerial norms (Acharya, 2014). Meaningful reform therefore requires both institutional redesign through greater transparency, enforceable contractor liability, as well as participatory governance structures, and discursive shifts that depoliticize migration policy by making visible the structural drivers of displacement (Global Coalition on Migration 2017). Practically, this means strengthening independent oversight, requiring full transparency in outsourcing contracts, institutionalizing migrant representation with decision-making authority, and embedding iterative, complexity-aware impact assessments so policies are judged by protection outcomes as well as managerial metrics (Scholten, 2019). Practically, this means strengthening independent oversight, requiring full transparency in outsourcing contracts, institutionalizing migrant representation with decision-making authority, and embedding iterative, complexity-aware impact assessments so policies are judged by protection outcomes as well as managerial metrics (Cairney and Geyer, 2017). Additionally, states and donors should reorient funding toward livelihoods and legal aid, impose enforceable human-rights conditions on assistance, and create regional burden-sharing mechanisms with clear accountability channels to prevent offshoring of responsibilities and to ensure distributive justice (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

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