

CHALLENGES OF THE GENERATION EXCHANGE IN THE ROMANIAN AGRICULTURE. HOW CAN THE EU FUNDING HELP REVERSE THE DEMOGRAPHICAL TIDAL WAVE

CHEREJI AURELIA IOANA¹, MAERESCU CRISTINA MARIA¹, ȚUȚUI DANIELA²,
CHIURCIU IRINA ADRIANA³, CHEREJI JR. IOAN¹

¹ *University of Oradea, Faculty of Environmental Protection, România*

² *The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, 6 Piata Romana, Bucharest, România*

³ *University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest, Faculty of Management and Rural Development, 59 Marasti Blvd, 011464, District 1, Bucharest, Romania*

*Corresponding author's e-mail: aureelia_brinaru@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The current paper present the acut problem of the demographical challenges the Romanian agriculture faces in a European context. It present the current situation as well as the historical evolution of the population involved in the agriculture with a focus on the period after 2007, the accession year in the EU as well as a forecast of the future. Romania's rural population has been in a constant decline, in line with the European evolutions, but with some local specificities due to the intense migration. The paper would present those measure taken already with the help of the EU funds to support the settlement of young farmers as well as other non-financial measures taken (education, training, etc.) meant to stabilize this trend. A special focus would be given to the National Strategic Plan post 2020 and the Recovery and Resilience Plan in an attempt to clarify and present the envisaged measures as well as presenting other aspects that may help to cope with this demographic problem (such as the use of new technologies).*

Keywords: *agriculture, demographical challenges, EU Funds, rural*

INTRODUCTION

Although when speaking nowadays about the agriculture the main problems on the agenda are related to climate change or more recently the food security aspects due to the conflict in Ukraine and its impact on the global food market one important aspect remains yet to be fully analysed. The demographic problem, of which we talk too little about but whose effects are profound, has a direct impact on ensuring generational change in agriculture and more.

The *Global Trends to 2030 report. Challenges and Choices for Europe*, a report prepared in 2019, provides an overarching demographic context with two critical elements of information. First is that us, as European citizens gives we will live longer, with estimates showing that in the European Union, in 2030, 25.5% of the population will be over 65 (from 19% in 2017), due to the improvements of the medical sector and the social sector, that create the premises for this favorable outcome. The other element of information has to do with the size of the populatin, as the European Union population is stagnant or declining, with an estimated 208 to 529 million inhabitants by 2030. [4]

Romania is in line with the European demographic tendencies as the 2030 estimates indicate a total population between 17.8 and 18.23 million inhabitants, with those over 65 years representing between 21, 1 and 21.3% of the total population. [5]

Adding to the national context is the extremely important fact that in Romania more than 1/5 of the population is employed in the agricultural sector (20,3%) in 2020, a situation that puts Romania in the first places in the European Union as regards the total percentage of the population working in the agricultural sector, while the European Union average of the population employed in the agricultural sector, as of 2018, is much lower, of only 4%. The Romanian percentage is lower than in 2007, the reference year, when the percentage was of 30.6%, yet it is still high. [22,27]

A strategy which aims a efficient generation exchange in agriculture suppose solving two problems: on one hand redraw of the old farmers and on the other hand, help given to the young for installation.[2]

The development of the rural areas requires a change of population behaviour and mentality, more involvement of the decision makers both at national and local level to find the best solutions for stimulating the multifunctional development of the rural space. [11]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current paper is a desk research based paper as it reviews and presents in a syntethic manner the official documents related to the demographic aspects. It realises a literature survey of the main official reports and studies dealing with the agricultural programs both at EU and national level that deal with the aspects related to demographics.

Also the paper is based upon the the survey of related public or academic debates that the authors could identify and that are relevant for the topic addressed in the paper.

The indicators of this article have been studied in the period 2016-2021. Also a series of the results presented in the paper have been presented in tables, interpreted and graphically represented.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The introductory data show that the working premisses are not necessarily the optimal ones. We are having a population in demographic decline, with a higher life expectancy that requires a particular set of policies that should guarantee a just and smooth generation exchange in the agricultural sector.

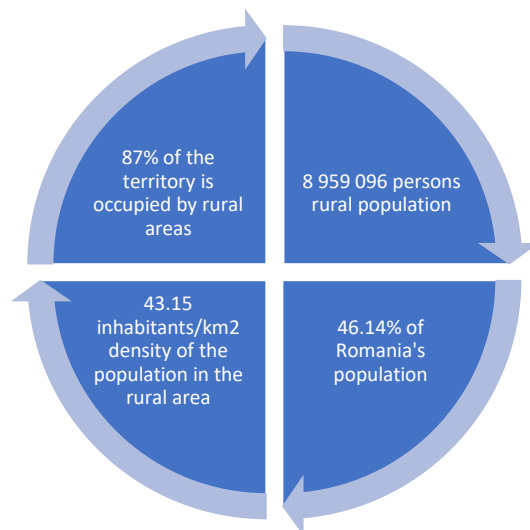


Figure 1. The structure of the population from rural areas

Source: Own graphical representation based upon the work „Zone rurale în declin” [Rural areas in decline], Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, 2020 [14]

What characterizes the Romanian rural areas is its strong heterogeneity, given first of all by their proximity or not to the main urban areas. Thus we have a positive demographic evolution in the rural localities located in the peri-urban or tourist reas and a negative demographic evolution in the isolated localities and those located at distances greater than 30km from the urban center. The rural population is thus closely related to the socio-economic evolution of the rural communities, being also influenced by other aspects such as: the level of development achieved by localities; infrastructure and public services; the living conditions that a rural locality. The decline of the rural population, which began as a consequence of the modernization of society, has become permanent by combining

several demographic, economic and social factors. The demographic decline is also associated with the continuous degradation of the age structure, caused by the aging process of the population, much more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas. However, Romania is a special case in which rural depopulation does not take place in favor of internal urbanization, but of international migration. The changes in the rural population in the last two decades, highlighted by the negative evolution of the main demographic indicators, have generated a pronounced demographic imbalance which is manifested by aging population, declining birth rate and fertility, increasing mortality, but also by the explosion of external migration. having as main negative effect the depopulation of rural areas (Figure 2). [18]

Chronology of demographic shrinkage

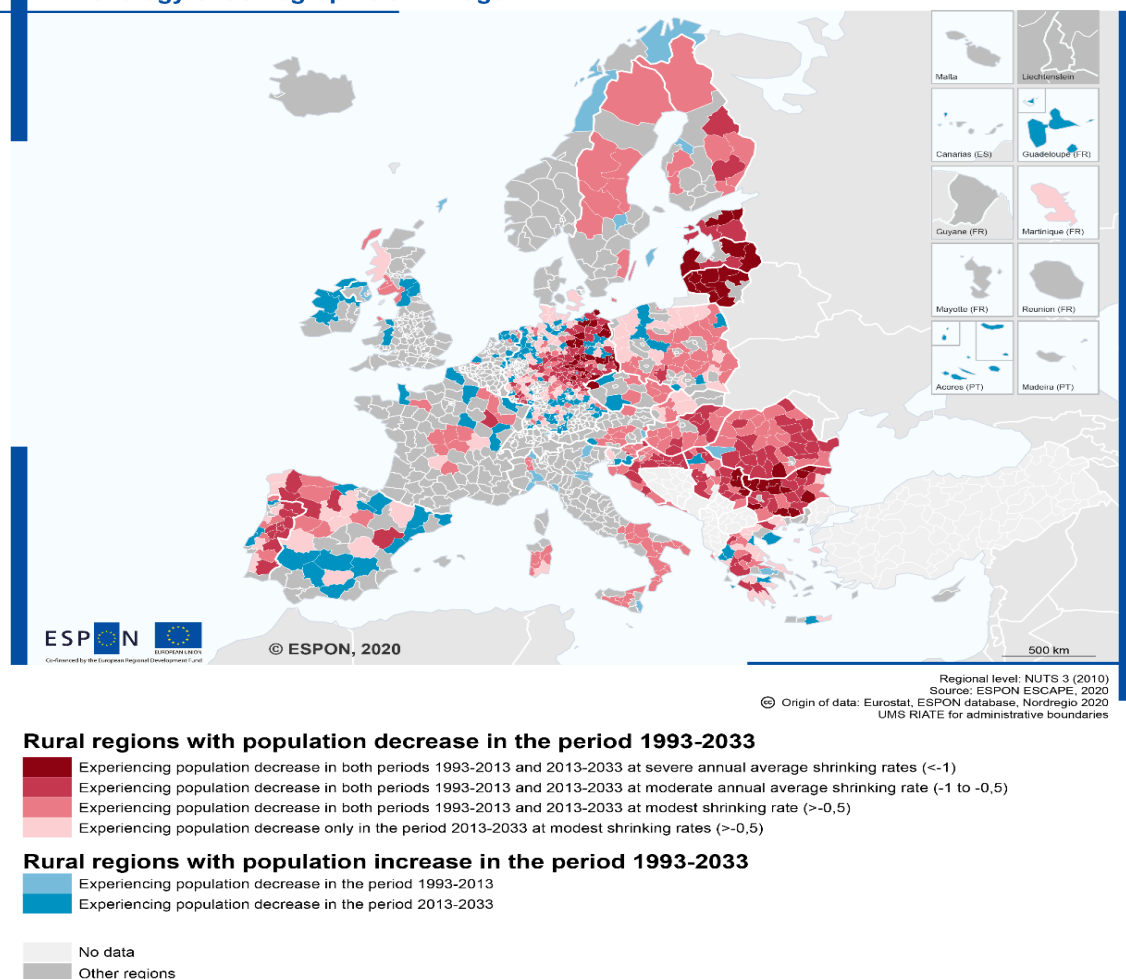


Figure 2. The chronology of demographic contraction

Source: EPSON based upon the work „Zone rurale în declin” [Rural areas in decline], Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, 2020 [14]

One direct consequence of this demographic crisis is the fact that Romania has a reduced number of young farmers. For instance at the European Union level as of 2016 there were 10.3 million farm managers with at average of 31.9% of them being old farmers 65 years and older with few young farmers. In Romania the percentage is above the EU average with more than 44.3% of them being 65 years and older, in a way that affects the sustainability of the farms and the biological replacement of farmers. More over in Romania the farms tend to be smaller, with 92% of them being smaller than 5ha while the EU average is of 65% under 5 ha (see Table 1 and Table 2). [16]

Table 1.

Farm managers in the EU and Romania, 2016

	Less than 40 years old %	Between 40 – 54 years old %	Between 55 – 64 years old %	65 years and older %
EU	10.9	31.9	25.1	31.9
Romania	7.6	25.7	22.3	44.3

Source: Eurostat, 2018 [16]

Table 2.

Farm managers in the EU and Romania, 2016

	Small farms (under 5 Ha) %	Large farms (equal or more than 50 hectares) %
EU	66.5	7.0
Romania	91.8	0.5

Source: Eurostat, 2018 [16]

This problem has now become an EU relevant and acknowledge one that appears in the official documents and reports issued by the European institutions. The aging of populations thus becoming a strategic problem affecting everyone in the sector. “Romania has one of the lowest share of young farmers in the total number of farm managers. And the share has been decreasing since 2010. The lack of access to land finance and education are the main challenges young farmers are faced with. Farms managed by young farmers, who are more open to new and innovative technologies, are more efficient and competitive. Addressing the generational renewal problem is needed for the transition towards a green and modern agriculture.” [13]

But the demographical aspects have also been perceived at the highest national decision-making level in Romania and have been formalised in a series of national documents, with a transversal sector that are being assumed at a societal level, such as the National Defence Strategy 2020 – 2024, issued by the Romanian president that should guide all the macro-policies in the area (see Figure 3). [23]

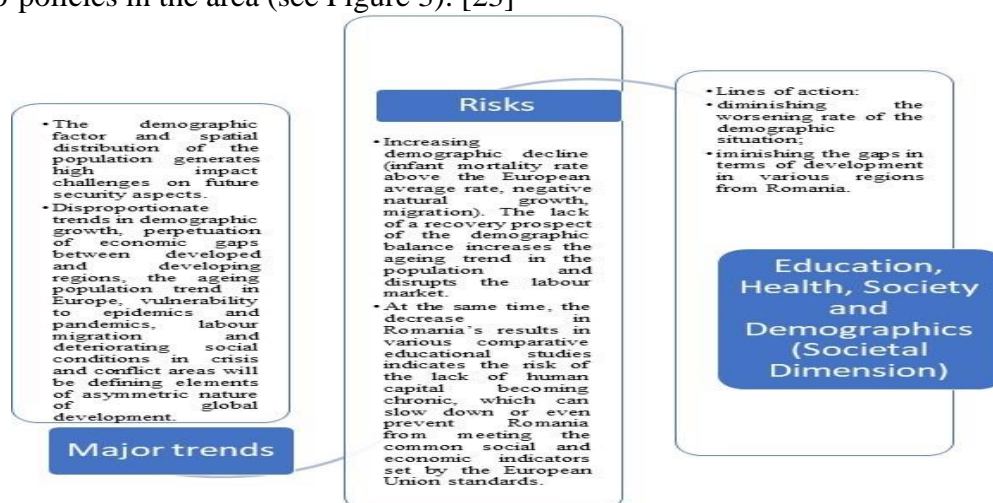


Figure 3. Demographical aspects in the National Defence Strategy 2020 - 2024

Source: Own graphical representation [23]

As a direct consequence of this strategic blueprint, the question of generation exchange has become enshrined in the subsequent governing programs. For that two measures are being specifically mentioned in the current Governing Programme 2021-

2024: the installation of young farmers, with financial support through the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD) and complementary public policy support measures. [24]

The recommendation to use EAFRD funds is not a surprise and is the result of a series of good and substantial results obtained in the past. For instance, in Romania, there is in place the sub-measure 6.1 “Support for the installation of young farmers”, within the National Rural Development Programme Romania (NRDP) 2014-2020, (former measure 112 of the NRDP 2007-2013) aimed at supporting the installation of the young farmers as farm managers. It as a sub-measure that also have had a positive side effect: it encouraged young people not to leave the rural areas and moreover attracted other people to those areas by encouraging them to come in and establish a business.

The success of this sub-measure also can be measured in some concrete financial indicators: the selection of a applications mounting a total of 438,120,000 Euro, out of the allocated amount of 466,754,112 Euro, meaning a degree of absorption of 93.87%, as of 20 May 2021 with a total of 10,674 selected funding applications. In county terms, the Dâmbovița County, was on the first place with a total of 863 projects selected for funding, Bihor County was on the second place with a total of 685 selected applications and the least selected applications (8 applications) were in Neamț County. [3]

Another important aspect that was mentioned in a series of official strategies and documents is the link that exists between demography, generations replacement, rural development and the aspects related to education. We have had one of the most clearly mentioned link in a 2015 Romanian Academy Strategy that spoke about the need to develop the connectivity and medical and educational infrastructure in the rural area, in order to favour the access of the young people to proper education, developemnt of agricultural linked network of schools, training the farmers and other related measures. [12]

We arrive thus at the problem of of the education in the area of agriculture. In the last decades we have witnessed an important reduction, especially in the area of secondary education, with a series of instutitons changing their profile from a fully agricultural one to a technological one, where the protection of environment or agriculture were some of the education options. This was also accompanied by a reduction of the number of pupils enrolled in a form of agricultural education (see Table 2).[19]

Table 3.

Number of secondary education institutions and their allocation by type of area, 2017 - 2018

	Total number in all the areas	Rural areas
Secondary education technological schools (profile natural resources and the protection of the environment)	323	99
Professional schools with the agricultural profile	24	20

Source: MADR, 2020 [19]

As regards the professional training of the Romanian farmers, from the data presented by the MARD it results that we are under the European average (31.6%) of the antreprenors that have agricultural studies (3.3%). In exchange, on the practical side we can consider that we are doing “very well” as the Romanian farmers have experience in aproportion of 96.7% (see Figure 4).

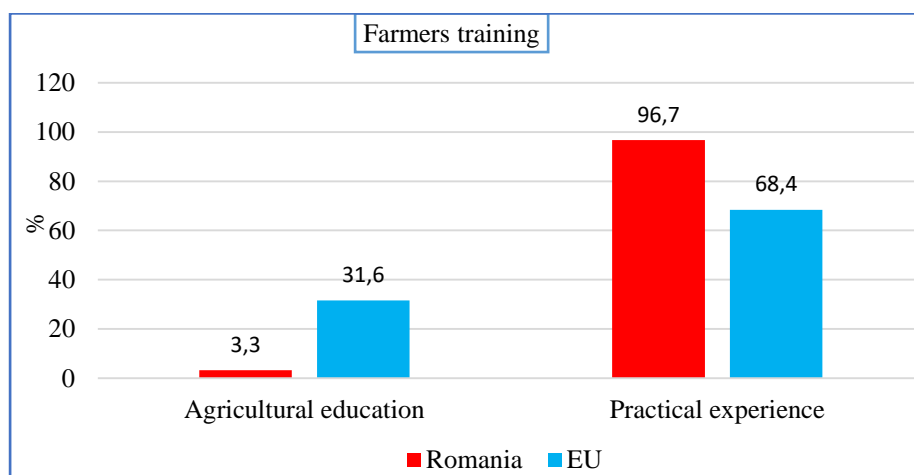


Figure 4. The professional training of the Romanian farmers

Source: Own graphical representation based upon the MADR data, 2021 [20]

All the above mentioned data are relevant as Romania enters into a phase dedicated to strategic planning in the sector of agriculture. Longtime undervaluated after the fall of the centralised and authoritarian communist regime in 1989, the importance of planning is slowly reemerging there is a stringent realisation of the fact that we need to have long term plans that would help guide our activities from a chaotic outcome that serves no one to better results in favour of the entire society, That is why concepts such as “strategic planning” have been explained and a series of handbook destined to the public authorities published within the framework of various projects. [10]

That became more obvious as the European Union, in the project of reforming the CAP introduce the concept of “national strategic plan” meant to take into consideration the local conditions in order to have a more sustainable policy. “Each plan will combine a wide range of targeted interventions addressing the specific needs of that EU country and deliver tangible results in relation to EU-level objectives (...).” [14]

This made that Romania prepared its own National Strategic Plan that was forced to settle up with the demographic reality and came up with realistic, down to earth solutions instead of mere general points. Thus the main weaknesses are the following: a) negative demographic trend and negative migratory balance, respectively declining rural population (in especially the young population) and aging (a decrease of about 2.4% during 2017 - 2021, of the rural population, respectively 4.12% of the young population aged between 0-25 years and 3.56% of the aging population and b) low level of education of young farmers (31.6% of EU farm managers 28 have basic and complete agricultural education while 96.7% of Romanian managers had only practical agricultural experience, compared to the EU 28 average of 68.3%). If for the demographical problem the solutions envisaged are more transversal for the education part the NSP is more concrete as it envisages to support the establishment of the AKIS system, as well as the provision of counseling, training and information for farmers, and in terms of education, it aims to support dual-type education partnership between technical schools (agricultural in rural areas) and farms-processing units / SMEs. [21]

The synergetic approach was complimented by the Recovery and Resilience Facility meant to alleviate the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For that purpose each Member State realised a National Recovery and Resilience Plan, similar to the above-mentioned National Strategic Plan. We have had thus a synergy between those two the NRRP included a series of measures meant to fight the weaknesses identified by the NSP. The general socio-economic and infrastructure investments in the rural areas are

expected to increase the quality of life of the rural population and therefore generating a positive demographic trend. As regards the education the plan is to transform the agricultural high schools into professionalisation centre, by supporting a total of 57 agricultural colleges, which shall be organised in 5 regional centres corresponding to the 5 agricultural universities established in Romania. A series of investment in both the material and human resources are thus envisaged. [25]

As we reminded on a daily basis that “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” [12] the same is true for the aspects related to ways of fighting the problems of the demographics in agriculture. As such the issue was tackled also partially in Romania’s Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 which intends that in order to achieve its objective of Zero Hunger “to develop a sustainable and competitive agri-food sector so as to improve quality of life in the rural environment and ensure living conditions like those in urban areas, to encourage local and ecological production, and to promote traditional and mountain products with added value.” [26]

The demographic and the education in the agricultural field as seen above seem to be interrelated. We cannot have one without the other and the solutions ahead of us are all solutions that take time. Having a healthy and relatively young rural population is a prerequisite condition for ensuring the food safety of the nation. Thus cannot be done directly but we need to create the necessary ecosystem for the population to thrive and restart the demographic growth cycle.

The solutions are largely those described by the official documents and can be summarised briefly by their intended end result – to have the rural areas achieving the same level of development like the urban areas. In fact when the less conformist solutions require a strong level of infrastructure development. For instance those experts stating that the development of agritourism activities would generate supplementary income to the rural areas are right but for that is required to develop the infrastructure of accommodation and the quality of services (meaning the quality of the workforce, that cannot be done unless you have an adequate educational infrastructure). [7]

One other aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is in fact the mobility of agricultural workers and managers may in fact be a blessing in disguise, as the Romanians going abroad are subjected to the modern tendencies of the agriculture in the West. Other than the immediate concrete advantage of financial remittances, that are sent back home to their families and that help them have a better life style they are also learning new competencies and skills that may be put into use into the rural areas and thus propel the rural development. [8]

All this must also take into account the yet under-analysed effects of the new technologies on the rural areas, the impact of perceptions on the desirability to remain in the rural areas and new aspects such as the land grab, the complex motivations of farmers and the social dynamics of the population in this new context. One very interesting is one related to the right of private property in the agricultural sector. We see a certain agreement with its limitations for some higher causes. Moreover there is a perception of the need to maintain both an optimal level of the rural land and an optimal level of the rural population (See Figure 5) [10]

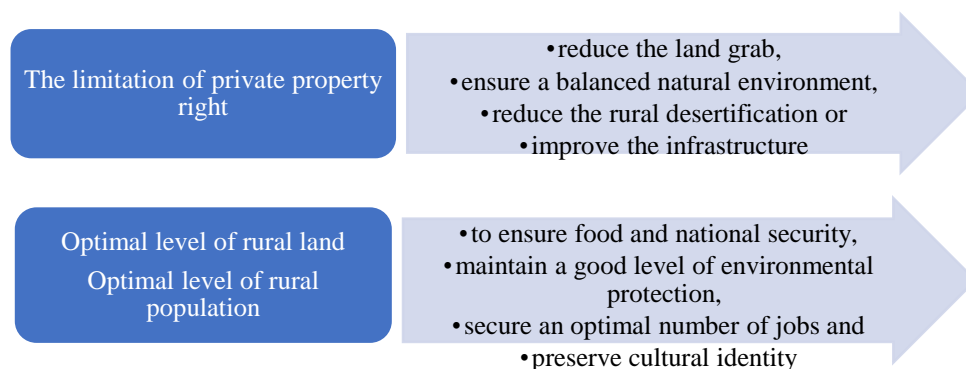


Figure 5. Graphical representation of “From scythe to smartphone (...)”

Source: Own adaptation “From scythe to smartphone (...)” [10]

This reality is becoming that important and visible that it has also been mentioned in the public debates involving experts and citizens organised in the margin of the Conference on the Future of Europe, an EU wide citizens consultation on what is the direction where we all shall go to. Thus the generational change and the question of education are there in the public conscience. [9]

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to realise that the above mentioned aspects are not mere technicalities but have deep and profound effects on our day to day life, on the food security and on the society as such as they are linked to the resilience of the agricultural system in these turbulent times. The resilience of the agricultural system has both a green and digital dimension but also a social and economic and more recently geopolitical one.

Moreover, reduced cohesion and the deepening of territorial divisions represent a structural risk to Romania as such. Added to this structural risk is the increased instability of agricultural markets and the insufficient resilience of the farms to shocks and crises. Whether we are talking about price volatility or political decisions, agriculture remains a vulnerable sector that needs to be supported by immediate and medium-term policies.

A better rural area is an area where not only the environment is protected and the infrastructure is developed, but an area where we have a healthy and demographically balanced population. For that purposes the generational change in the rural area is not just a strictly academic debate but rather a critical aspect if we still want a future for us and our children.

We are now facing some of the most challenging times of our lives and its our generation mission to fight for the survival and thriving of the rural areas and of the rural population. No longer can we sit idly while our traditions crumbles and the agricultural sector suffers in front of challenges that cannot be resolved by the farmers’ alone. The situation is as seen above complicated but with we need to obtain wisdom and acquire prudence in order to solve them, a task that we as a society are more than up to.

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