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The Rebirth of Civil Society

The Growth of Women's NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT   This article examines the development, activities and effectiveness of women's NGOs in 10 Central and Eastern European countries. It begins by examining the establishment of women's organizations post-1989, identifying their structure, funding difficulties and the issues on which they focus. It also addresses the tension between the work of NGOs and the wider development of civil society. The article goes on to explore how negative perceptions of feminism have hindered efforts to develop a unified and coherent agenda among women's NGOs. Finally, it analyses how public attitudes have affected relations between women's organizations and women politicians as well as how competition and fragmentation have complicated relationships between NGOs.

KEY WORDS   Central and Eastern Europe ◆ civil society ◆ feminism ◆ women's NGOs

At first glance, the western world saw Communism as a society that encouraged equality between women and men more than the welfare state, a perception actively promoted by Communist leaders at home and abroad. In reality, this was a fiction as the political structures across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) remained male-dominated and decision-making power was not shared between the sexes. The creation of new democratic institutions in the post-1989 transition period offered an opportunity for increasing women's political representation and mainstreaming gender interests, yet women remain underrepresented in decision-making bodies across CEE. While political and academic attention tends to focus on the number of women in parliament as an easily measurable indicator of women's social force, it is also important to examine women's activities in civil society. This is particularly necessary in CEE countries because gender is underestimated in formal political spheres and political participation is often unattractive to women given

the legacy of Communism, leading many to eschew politics in favour of an active civic role:

> During the socialist period, when oppositional movements first articulated the importance of civil society and stressed the heroism of their own dissi-dent actions, it was men who took the most visible roles. . . . But when parliamentary politics became a forum for asserting power and influence, civil society came to be seen as less attractive to men and relatively weak. In the years since 1989, civil society has increasingly become an arena of women's political action; national politics, the realm of men. (Gal and Kligman, 2000: 95)

This article focuses on women's campaigns for political change through the non-governmental sector in CEE. It utilizes research conducted during an EU-funded project examining the political participation of women in 10 CEE countries, which were part of the former Communist bloc and are now either new or aspirant members of the European Union (EU). The article draws on individual country reports that were prepared for the European Commission during the third phase of the project, which focused on 'Mapping Women's Campaign for Change'. This phase examined the state of the women's movement in the post-1989 period and mapped the issues on which women's NGOs are focusing their attention. Project partners used primarily qualitative research methods, conducting interviews between late 2003 and early 2004 with at least two individuals from each of the following categories: feminists and members of women's NGOs; leading women in pre-1989 democratization movements; indi-viduals currently responsible for gender equality (equality commission, trade union); and relevant others (media, academia). All interviewees were asked the same set of core questions, which focused on the structure and function of women's NGOs, links between women's NGOs, and the relationship between women's NGOs and policy-makers.

The article begins by examining the establishment of women's organiz-ations post-1989, identifying their structure, funding difficulties and the issues on which they are campaigning. It also addresses the tension between the work of NGOs and the wider development of civil society. Next, the article explores how negative perceptions of feminism have hindered efforts to develop a unified and coherent agenda among women's NGOs. Finally, it analyses how public attitudes have affected relations between women's organizations and women politicians as well as how competition and fragmentation have complicated relationships between NGOs.

STRUCTURES AND PROBLEMS

In addition to the construction of healthy political institutions during the transition from state socialism to democratic capitalism, the establishment of a vibrant non-governmental sector is vital to the development of young democracies (Nagle and Mahr, 1999). The mid-1990s was a period of tremendous growth in the civic sector across CEE, and women took particular advantage of the new political environment by forming NGOs to address common concerns. They tend to focus on a similar range of issues: namely, the provision of social services (e.g. health care and education); the promotion of business and professional activities; activism to prevent violence against women and domestic abuse; and – to a lesser degree – efforts to increase women's political rights. Some argue that the social focus was partially a deliberate strategy in response to the experience of a totalitarian state and the current liberal ideology, similar to 'the strategies of the women's movements in the 19th century and to the dissident experiences of the 1980s – in the sense of forming parallel spaces of difference and diversity while trying to avoid mainstream politics' (Jalušič, 2002a: 105).

Lithuania provides a typical example. Most women's organizations were formed between 1992 and 1996 after the country entered a phase of democratic consolidation and achieved macroeconomic stability. They include the revival of some historical women's self-help associations and the establishment of women's clubs, societies and study centres (Taljunaite, 2004). The situation in the Czech Republic is similar: immediately after 1989 more than 70 foundations that could be characterized as women's NGOs were formed (Čermáková et al., 2000). Between 1989 and 2003, the NGO situation fluctuated due to political and legislative changes, with 59 entities currently listed in the register of Czech women's organizations. Slovenia, which operated within Yugoslavia's less restrictive socialist regime, saw women's groups emerging much earlier. The first group explicitly defining itself as 'for women only' was the women's section of the Slovenian Society of Sociology, which was founded in late 1984 and led to the establishment of other women's organizations (Bahovec, 2004).

The biggest problem with the current development of civil society in CEE is summarized by Ferenc Misslevitz, who stated: 'what we dreamed of was civil society; what we got was NGOs' (Misslevitz, 1997, quoted in Einhorn, 2000: 117). Civil society should not only be seen as institutions and organizations, but also as 'an ideological foundation that produces the quite real social effect of newly perceptible boundaries between state organizations and what can now, as a result of such boundaries, be called voluntary, independent, or "nongovernmental organizations"' (Gal and Kligman, 2000: 94). However, transition literature shows that 'institutions

of civil society are rather weak in respect to their impact on social relations and their influence on political decisions. . . . [They] therefore primarily serve to fill the gaps left by the departed state' (Lemke, 2001: 13). This raises pertinent questions about the roles of women's organizations, since they tend to focus on self-help, education and the public service. The danger is that this civil society 'gap', according to Einhorn, 'perpetuates the undervaluing of women's political involvement, demeaning it as "mere" humanitarian activity conducted within the terms of the nurturing and caring roles often deemed "natural" for women' (Einhorn, 2000: 118). As a member of a Slovenian NGO working on equality issues laments: 'Today the feminist movement, unlike in the 1980s, has gotten lost in the sphere of the social' (Bahovec, 2004: 20).

While some women preferred to focus on social activities and to create a safe space outside parliamentary politics, the weakness of civil society and the lack of grassroots resources forced many NGOs to target project applications to governments or international organizations (Parrott, 1997). Many CEE women's NGOs have been unable to initiate large-scale projects or lobby for political reforms, concentrating instead on voluntary work or the delivery of social services through a framework of programmes initiated by western donors (e.g. domestic violence, counselling services). As NGOs become professionalized, they 'begin functioning according to institutional rules and hierarchies, so they will concentrate on acquiring funds for their activities, and often lose sight of the relevant issues' (Jalušič, 2002b: 81). For example, the Bulgarian NGO sector remains underdeveloped due to a lack of autonomous fundraising, dependence on donors and the tendency to target projects at available money (Videva, 2004).

The reliance on foreign money can make NGOs beholden to the viewpoint of the funder and less effective in promoting their own agenda of change. The leader of a Romanian women's NGO lamented, 'We are not given money for what we do, but for what they want us to do' (Ghebrea, 2004: 10). There has been a particular danger for women's organizations in receiving aid from abroad, as references to and texts on women come from these sources without necessarily taking the local context or legal bases into account. A Romanian academic described her country's experience of receiving financial assistance to aid the implementation of European legislation as 'the core of this new wooden language of building eastern democracies with western bricks' (Grünberg, 2000). Similarly, Sabine Lang (1997) described what she saw in the former East Germany as the dangers of the state coopting a feminist agenda as the 'NGO-ization of feminism'. In contrast, other academics argue that 'given the financial and bureaucratic obstacles that many of these organizations have had to overcome, it has to be concluded that most of them stem from genuine local impulses' (Kaldor and Vejvoda, 2002: 18).

Limited funding causes women's organizations to fight each other for scarce resources, hindering their ability to work collaboratively and exert greater political force. A Slovenian journalist at a 'women and family' newspaper explains:

> Non-governmental organizations don't actually deal with politics today. At one time these groups had a political scope, but now they don't anymore because they are constantly in a subordinate position because of funding on the part of the state. . . . On the concrete level the different groups have all just more or less given up, and moreover, they fight among themselves, and that is bad. (Bahovec, 2004: 21)

Furthermore, western money is drying up as CEE countries reach higher development levels. Many donors are shifting their attention to other regions and expect NGOs to receive funding from the EU. However, women's NGOs are concerned about their ability to access these resources, particularly given the complexity and time-intensive nature of the application process. Czech social actors fear EU pre-accession funds will be transferred to structural funds, which they are not prepared to apply for partly because state institutions failed to prepare the ground for using these funds (Haskova, 2004). Similarly, Slovenian women are not very confident about the likelihood of obtaining EU funding given the bureaucracy (Bahovec, 2004).

Aside from the lack of money, some women's NGOs are averse to engaging in more political lobbying because they feel weak due to their limited staff numbers, membership base and public support. For example, women's NGOs in the Czech Republic remain fragmented, face difficulty in attracting supporters and have a marginal influence on policy-making. The general public is virtually unaware of movements or organizations that are active in the promotion of women's rights, with a recent survey citing only two out of 10 people regardless of sex who could give an example ('Výsledky výzkumu . . .', 2002). Few Polish women's NGOs have been campaigning for equality, having a limited influence on state politics (see Malinowska, 2000). Political actors championing women's rights remain weak in the three Baltic countries (Korolova, 1999; Paluckiene, 2000); for example, the two largest women's organizations are concentrating on socioeconomic and cultural-ethnic problems rather than specifically women's issues (see Laja, 2000). Few Slovak women's associations are trying to change gender stereotypes and address previously taboo subjects (e.g. domestic violence, labour market inequality, women's political participation), though such issues are slowly becoming more visible due to media and public campaigns (Bitusikova, 2004; Bútorová et al., 2002).

RELATIONSHIP WITH FEMINISM

Negative conceptions of feminism also hinder NGO efforts to promote gender equality as a policy priority. A recent survey in the Czech Republic ('Výsledky výzkumu . . .', 2002) found that almost 50 percent of men and more than one-third of women consider feminist groups fighting for women's rights to be useless, while one-quarter of both sexes remain uncertain about them. Such opinions are partially due to the perception of feminism as a negative concept, interpreted as anti-family, anti-child and anti-feminine. According to a Czech visual artist: 'when you say feminism, everyone imagines the radical feminists who march some-where with banners and look like men' (Haskova, 2004: 29). Many women are averse to the idea of 'feminism', as they associate it with state inter-vention and discredited 'isms' of the past (Einhorn, 1996; Gal and Kligman, 2000; Goldman, 1996). In Estonia, it is perceived as a radical idea from the 19th century, while feminists are rarely seen as supporters of equal opportunities among 'ordinary' people. Many understand feminism in the extreme as women hating men and gaining political advantage due to their sex, believing gender equality ignores a basic prin-ciple of nature and is an imported problem (Laas, 2004). In Hungary, feminism is defined narrowly as a movement dealing only with private matters and sexually oriented issues or is misinterpreted as 'man-hating'. Some refuse to identify with the plight of their sisters and lack a culture of rights from which to draw (Eberhardt, 2004). Many Lithuanians suggest women are doing fine, simply requiring better jobs and services rather than abstract ideas (Purvaneckiene, 1997).

Because the Communist regimes considered emancipation a state ideology and emphasized women's liberation under Communism, many believed the women's movement had been humiliated and was unnecess-ary post-1989. This view is perpetuated by some current authorities who argue that the 'equal rights' granted to women have not been abolished so therefore gender is not a problem (Taljunaite, 2004). In Poland, equal rights ideas were discredited in the early 1990s in two ways (Fuszara, 1991). One was the equality decreed from the top-down by Communist authorities, commonly associated with the image of a woman driving a tractor dressed in dungarees and eviscerated of her femininity as well as with the activities of the Women's League, which was controlled by the authorities. The other was anecdotes about western feminists whose afflu-ence had gone to their heads, who hated men and their families, and who were mainly involved in burning their bras.

During the 1990s, there were frequent debates between and among western feminists and their Eastern European sisters. Western liberal feminism and socialist state equality measures envisioned an equality whereby women were treated like men, but both ignored the fact that

women are not treated equally in opportunities or pay (see Eisenstein, 1993). Liberal feminist thinking has since adopted a more progressive position, recognizing differences between women related to class, race, sexual orientation and ethnicity. It now focuses on equality of outcome, having moved beyond equality of opportunity that the 'sameness' concept implied. Under Communism, sexual difference was not experienced as the source of women's political inequality; rather, sexual equalization was the unintended consequence of state socialism where political exclusion was defined as society vis-à-vis the state (Watson, 2000). In other words, 'The negative improvement of the position of women as compared with that of men was accomplished through a degradation of all individuals to objects' (Havelková, 1993: 65–6). Consequently, many women now want to emphasize their differences. Because equality was 'interpreted as sameness, requiring formal and substantive conditions to avoid discrimination against women', emancipation meant women should be independent and equal to men in terms of having the same opportunities for public sphere employment (Kiczková and Farkašová, 1993: 84). Thus, 'Real equality must start with sexual difference as a given; it should articulate the specific nature of female subjectivity and identity' (Kiczková and Farkašová, 1993: 93). However, Einhorn (1996: 78) warns that as 'difference' already exists in terms of ethnicity or language, many women are reluctant to add gender as a basis of difference – not least because it associates them with other contested social categories. Consequently, 'many women's primary group attachment and loyalty has been prioritized to a group other than women [e.g. nation, family, community]' (Duffy, 2000: 223–4).

Many CEE women dislike feminism's perceived linkages to anti-male attitudes and stereotyped western feminism, and prioritize economic development over the achievement of equality (Fábián, 2002). Some Lithuanian women believe it is a luxury to worry about gender issues when there are more 'pressing' concerns, suggesting women simply require better jobs and services rather than abstract ideas (Purvaneckiene, 1997). Similarly, many Romanian women think their society faces more serious problems (e.g. consolidation of private property and democracy), and support changes that would help women in the community (e.g. the workplace, salary and pension, better home appliances) rather than calls for more active civic participation. As a lecturer in gender studies pointed out: 'It is a women's movement for the privileged, for those women who can afford to take part in all the meetings; we should consider the fact that the majority of women who are really abused and work from dawn till dusk cannot afford this' (Ghebrea, 2004: 33).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NGOS

Women's NGOs in most CEE countries have struggled to develop a cooperative spirit, as they compete for scarce resources and focus on overlapping issues. Furthermore, there is not a uniform movement with common aims and platforms. The Latvian Minister of Special Assignment on the Issues of Public Information stated: 'I would not call it a women's movement, what we have here in Latvia; we have individuals and individual NGOs working on these [gender] issues' (Cimdina, 2004: 7). In Hungary, the women's civic sector suffers from external weaknesses (including undemocratic institutional mechanisms and lack of financial support) and discord between organizations (stemming from a lack of lobbying experience, knowledge of democratic norms and understanding of the importance of collective representation). At best, NGOs cooperate with sister organizations by arranging conferences and training programmes, while some never speak to others or engage in outright competition (Eberhardt, 2004). In the Czech Republic, many female NGO members and officials report little cooperation in the women's NGO sector, citing 'lone fighters', competitive rivalry, mutual bickering and criticism, lack of communication and cooperation, and the tendency to define themselves in opposition to one another. Limited interaction is partly due to a lack of time and personal disharmony between experts, while competition for funds between topically related women's NGOs hinders their ability to cooperate. However, they also expressed feelings of satisfaction and mutual appreciation of activities of individuals and organizations, believing that greater cooperation would help implement their shared goals (Haskova, 2004).

There is also tension between feminist and non-feminist groups (see Einhorn and Sever, 2003). Women's groups in Slovakia have benefited from some national collaboration, but they also suffer from distrust, a lack of coordination and rivalry. Part of the problem is that women's organizations arose from individual initiatives rather than a clear philosophy, further complicated by the division between feminist and non-feminist organizations (including those established to run a single project) (Bitusikova, 2004). In Poland, women's NGOs are completely divided between Catholic groups and less traditional/feminist groups, particularly in regards to their attitudes to abortion and women's role in the family (exemplified by their separate reports to the Beijing Women's Conference) (Fuszara, 2004).

Some countries report better levels of cooperation. The identification of a shared goal can help unite women's organizations. For example, debates around the proposed ban on abortions were particularly powerful mobilizers of women in Hungary (Lévai, 2000; Neményi, 1991), Poland (Fuszara, 1991, 1993) and Slovenia (Bahovec, 1991). As a member of a Slovenian NGO fighting for equal opportunities recalls:

> The abortion issue, as I remember, was the last big consolidation of women. . . . When a crowd as large and diverse as it was then actually steps forward with great intellectual capability – this is what wins the day. It's very sad, I think, that with the referendum about artificial insemination there wasn't the same success as with abortion. Here, too, one can see a split in the female body. (Bahovec, 2004: 16)

Romanian NGOs tend to collaborate on a per-project rather than a permanent basis. The leader of an important women's organization stated:

> There is a lack of unity, or at best there is an ad-hoc unity. The movement is dispersed, certainly, any top-down unification would be dubious, but so far it gives a pointillist impression. It appears to have been painted from isolated points, with no communication between them. (Ghebrea, 2004: 35)

Successful collaboration has also occurred when women's NGOs unite with minority groups (e.g. Roma, Hungarian, gay and lesbian) to change the general mentality, provide multiple social viewpoints and develop a collaborative space – though not necessarily to achieve specific objectives. A member of the Association of Roma Women in Slovakia cited close links with other Roma and non-Roma NGOs:

> If a woman has a problem, it does not matter whether she is white or dark or black, she always feels the same as a mother. . . . Whenever we have some questions or problems, we ask our friends from other NGOs . . . and they always help. If there is a mess in the house, it is only a woman who will tidy it up. Either female politicians or activists from NGOs – they help us mainly as women. (Bitusikova, 2004: 15)

In Bulgaria, interviews revealed that cooperation among women's NGOs is often due to the intersection of gender with issues of minority groups and social care, as well as due to links between organizations working in the same sphere (e.g. violence against women, gender equality). Such cooperation can be eased by the existence of an umbrella organization that clearly defines a legitimate, institutionalized NGO partnership and structures communication between members (Videva, 2004). Umbrella organizations can also help member organizations develop their activities and represent members' interests at national and international political levels.

There are numerous examples of successful regional and international cooperation, which enables women's NGOs to obtain experience and skills, exchange information (including developments in speciality areas), cooperate on joint projects and develop a focus on international problems with local relevance. While an earlier section cited the dangers of an over-reliance on foreign donors, international and western NGOs have clearly helped women in CEE by starting projects, financing activities and

supporting the formation of local associations (e.g. self-help groups, hotlines and shelters for battered women). Women's organizations in the Czech Republic have cooperated primarily with foreign NGOs working on the same specific topics, such as women and sport; the degree of contact varies widely between organizations (Haskova, 2004). The Baltic states have benefited from the experiences of their Nordic neighbours in particular (Cimdina, 2004; Laas, 2004). Romanian NGOs have developed contacts with NGOs in Western Europe on the establishment of the equality *acquis*, and are beginning relationships with those in CEE. The main benefits have been gaining knowledge about western perspectives, participating in training exercises and mobilizing women. Disappointments include the short duration of relations due to project limitations, the difficulty of implementing lessons in the Romanian context and the lack of funds to participate in international NGO networks (Ghebrea, 2004). Slovakian and Hungarian NGOs report limited connections with the West thus far (Bitusikova, 2004; Eberhardt, 2004).

RELATIONSHIP WITH POLITICIANS

Negative public perceptions towards feminism and gender equality have made many CEE women politicians reluctant to openly support women's issues. A Lithuanian researcher explained that, 'the patriarchal attitudes towards family problems are a good background for a political career, because it is considered as opposition to [the] totalitarian "Soviet" past. So, if somebody would like to be accepted in this society, he or she cannot speak as pro-feminist' (Taljunaite, 2004: 27). In Hungary, the few women who successfully obtain public office rarely represent women's interests for fear of being marginalized by their party or due to a lack of female solidarity. The leader of the parliamentary faction of the Hungarian Socialist Party explained:

> Originally, feminism means something I can identify with. The fact that this term has so pejorative connotations in Hungary, involving anti-men attitudes, is a different question. It is a pity and it would be good to rub this out of the term. To be honest, I am a conformist and I do not use the term feminism when I could. Rather, I talk about equal opportunities . . . this is a stylistic compromise. I use the term less and only in situations when I am sure everybody else means the same thing by it. (Eberhardt, 2004: 20)

Women politicians across CEE tend to represent their political party first and women second. A Czech book editor stated:

> The way I see it, they do not come across as pro-women. They are just politicians in the sense that they fulfil the will of their parties. . . . I have not even

noticed that they would in any way accent specific women's issues, women's problems, or that they would be in contact with women's groups and co-operate with them. (Haskova, 2004: 58)

The relationship between Romanian parliamentarians, who remain focused on their party's electoral gain, and women's NGOs remains informative (rather than discursive), infrequent and of questionable effectiveness. The founder of a civic movement said government had a generally 'bad relationship with civil society and its representatives. If they [government ministries] do agree to consultations, these are formal ones. There have been numerous cases where the NGOs were asked after the decision had been already taken; these situations are pure propaganda' (Ghebrea, 2004: 44). Efforts are being made in Estonia to counteract such negative stereotypes, as female politicians have encouraged other women to enter politics and have stressed the importance of not stigmatizing those who do (Laas, 2004). Women's NGOs in the Czech Republic criticize women politicians for appearing uninterested in women's issues if they do not actively promote them; however, they are sympathetic to the complex situation faced by the limited number of women politicians given the negative attitude of many Czech politicians towards gender issues (Haskova, 2004).

Women's NGOs in some countries have been more successful in accessing their female leaders through training exercises or targeted lobbying activities. For example, some of Bulgaria's main gender-oriented organizations have organized educational seminars among politicians, female NGO activists and public figures from both genders. They have also approached governmental structures in charge of issues on migration, discrimination and social policy, trying to promote a change in the conditions faced by women (Videva, 2004). In Slovakia, several women's organizations have lobbied policy-makers and achieved some positive results – such as parliamentary approval of acts against domestic violence. A member of the pre-election initiative 'Let Us Do It' (2002) cites the involvement of some women politicians, but does 'not feel a lot of interest or attention from the Government. This is a bottom-up movement. We try to motivate women in the regions, to make them interested in public life, in decision-making' (Bitusikova, 2004: 16).

CONCLUSION

This article focused on the post-1989 development of women's organizations in CEE, examining the structure and function of women's organizations in the transition period, exploring how perceptions of feminism shape the work of women's NGOs and discussing relationships between

NGOs and with women politicians. While there are clearly differences between women's organizations across CEE, the vast majority remain focused on the provision of social services to the exclusion of political activism. Several arguments can help explain this trend, including limited public support for gender issues, a lack of funding that focuses efforts primarily on the implementation of a given social project, and an aversion to active engagement in parliamentary politics post-Communism.

Women's campaign for gender equality has clearly been affected by the legacy of Communism. Following the transition, a feminist movement was seen as unnecessary because the demagogic Communist agenda had damaged awareness of women's rights by emphasizing women's (supposed) emancipation. Consequently, few acknowledge a women's movement in any CEE country, while the split within women's organizations demonstrates the lack of solidarity and empathy among women. Scarce financial resources cause competition between women's NGOs, whose efforts are often fragmented and disjointed. Cooperation is limited, usually the result of shared interest in a particular topic (e.g. abortion, Roma) or due to the efforts of an umbrella organization. The idea that women should support women to achieve common objectives is not widely held, and for further hindered by the failure of many women in government and the civil service to recognize gender as a political issue. Despite their increased activism, women's NGOs remain limited in their abilities to mobilize the general public and to influence government policy substantially.

In other words, CEE women have yet to conquer the political domain: they face 'the arduous task of campaigning against the general political conservatism that sustains the misapprehension of gender equality and undermines the social significance of women's emancipation' (Eberhardt, 2004: 31). There is a conflict between two competing perspectives: one that strengthens the social position of women on the basis of traditional gender roles and another that seeks a more radical notion of gender equality by challenging such gender classifications. It is becoming increasingly clear that a framework for the promotion of women's rights must combine both approaches: 'The strategies reinforcing a familiar conception of gender identity could be effective in mobilising women and women's groups, while the strategies questioning the essential difference between the sexes could be helpful in initiating major changes of social and personal relations' (Eberhardt, 2004: 32). While the latter, more political and progressive approach currently has less support and a narrower scope of action than the former, the positive examples cited in this text suggest that change is indeed possible.

NOTE

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