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FOSSIL FUEL LOCK-IN: WHY GAS IS A FALSE SOLUTION CONFERENCE REPORT BY KEVIN BUCKLAND

The <u>Conference</u> "Fossil fuel lock-in: why gas is a false solution", held in Brussels from September 26-28, 2016 was attended by more than 50 climate and energy activists from North Africa, the U.S., Argentina and across Europe. The conference was organized by Corporate Europe Observatory, Friends of the Earth Europe, CounterBalance, War on Want, Food & Water Europe, PowerShift e.V. Berlin and Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Brussels Office. Its goals were to improve networking among climate and energy activists, upgrade levels of information and lay groundwork for moving towards collective action. This report captures some of the strategic information, focuses of attention, and collective agreements that came out of this conference.

It's time for action

Gas is a rising, important, and yet under-addressed issue. New research exposes the dangerous climate risks of gas (methane) and the grave dangers new gas infrastructure poses towards a "lock-in" to fossil fuel based energy systems. Despite this, while Europe aims to reduce its dependence on Russia for gas, it is deciding new free trade deals that enable the import of liquefied natural gas, and directing more and more public money towards new gas infrastructure instead of turning towards renewables. Meanwhile, the fossil fuel industry is moving beyond climate denial and using lobbying and advertising to frame gas as an intermediate energy supplier and an ideal partner for renewables with low climate effects.

It is in this context that a narrative battle around gas is already being waged as the world determines the role fossil fuels will play in new energy systems. Laura Weis from PowerShift e.V. Berlin presented the industry's successful greenwashing of gas, whereby fossil fuel majors that used to be climate-deniers now position themselves as part-of-the-solution (<u>Open letter</u> of major oil companies to UN governments, 01/06/2015). The industries' narrative is meeting so far little resistance with the EU Commission labelling gas as low carbon; and even some environmental NGOs advocating for gas. (As recently as 2010, <u>Greenpeace</u> published a report titled: Fossil gas: bridge into the renewable age.) Arias Cañete, EU Commissioner for Energy and Climate, has said "gas is the cleanest fossil fuel... It is a bridge between coal and renewables." (Politico, 23/09/2015). Laura Weis concludes, that there is currently "massive political will to expand gas industry" but we need to be doing precisely the opposite, because "gas is not a companion to renewables but competition; gas is not a bridge fuel but a lock-in; gas is not a solution but part of the problem."

It has become both necessary and strategic to engage in this narrative and political battle in order to contest the growing illusion of gas as "ideal partner of renewables" and a transition fuel. Gas is not a "bridge fuel" to renewables, but rather a "bridge" for the fossil fuel industry to maintain its power and share prices. If movements are able to make a unified stand against new gas infrastructure, we will be taking out the fossil fuel industry's bridge to the future, creating more space for decentralized renewables for real democratic energy transitions. Tadzio Müller from the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung stated: "We need to start stopping gas, we *can* stop it, and hopefully this workshop will be the start of us stopping it."

The push for gas in Europe

The European gas context has undergone a major change since the disruption of gas prices accompanying the 2005/2006 conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the latter being Europe's most active gas supplier. The impacts of this conflict shifted the frame of energy politics of EU institutions to a politics of energy security and later to the plan for the Energy Union, aiming at

making energy secure, sustainable, and affordable by building a more resilient energy system less exposed to the whims of individual actors.

Antoine Simon of Friends of the Earth Europe showed that the shift away from Russian gas and towards a politics of energy security has manifested itself politically in a number of different ways. Firstly, the Juncker Plan and the Connecting Europe Facility Fund (5 Billion €) will fund 77 Projects of Common Interest (PCIs) with a strong focus on gas import infrastructure. Nearly 900 million euros are planned for gas projects, notably three times more than allocated to renewables. Secondly, new free trade deals such as TTIP would lift restrictions on gas exports from the U.S. and give legal backing to the prioritization of multinational gas infrastructure. Next, Europe is channelling more and more public money towards gas infrastructure through the European Investment Bank (EIB) and state banks. Finally, the desire for energetic resilience places gas in direct competition with renewables: causing a rise in lobbying from the Fossil Fuel Industry as well as a takeover of the renewables lobby by the fossil fuel industry. One panellist summarized: "If all this (planned gas import infrastructure) is built, there is no way out of gas for centuries".

Among the EU Commission there is little space to question the general assumption that gas will play an important role in EU's future energy systems.

Manon Dufour from E3G questioned the EU Commission's projection. Europe's gas production, reserves and consumption are falling, unlike much of the world where gas production is increasing. And, 80% of European gas demand stems from just 7 western-European countries. As such, without building new infrastructure, Europe already has enough capacity to cover any gas scenario until 2040 (Source: EC, Bruegel, media report, Current and planned EU gas import infrastructure). Alfons Perez from ODG, Barcelona, showed, that Europe's gas infrastructure has already been over-constructed with 30 or 40% of capacity still not being used. Despite this, the proposed PCIs (mentioned above) are setting up the EU to be a major gas importer.

However, the EU Commission have overestimated Europe's future gas demand - projecting between 380 and 450 cubic meters (bcms) in 2030 (Maroš Šefčovič, EU Energy Union Vice President, 27/05/2016), and have plans underway to expand current capacities by another 58%! The European gas lock-in is based precisely on this dangerous assumption of increased demand and consequently, Europe - through both LNG and pipelines - is overbuilding an infrastructure that doesn't correspond with demand and is in direct contrast to the goals of decarbonizing the economy by 80-95% by 2050 and places at risk the EU's ability to keep to its climate targets and the Paris Agreement's shared goal of keeping climate change "well below 2 degrees". With this, Manon Dufour concluded, "Either we are wasting public money, or we are putting at risk our climate commitment".

Gas is far from being an exceptional case regarding climate targets. In the 9 months since the Paris Agreement shifted from 2 degrees goal to 1.5, "Nothing has happened at the EU level", noted a participant. "None of the objectives have changed now that the horizon is different. It doesn't seem to be the intention of the EU to change the targets at the moment." Immediate political decisions around energy infrastructure will be the litmus test of real climate action: to see if countries and the EU take their climate pledges seriously, or if long-term goals are merely a pretext to continue business-as-usual.

Methane emissions, a bridge to climate disaster

The Fossil Fuel Lock-in Conference had the great privilege of the presence of Robert W. Howarth of Cornell University, and board member of Food&Water. He presented his research on the effects of methane emissions on the atmosphere (Howarth prefers to call gas "methane"). While methane emits significantly less CO2 than other fossil fuels when burned, in its natural form it has a truly dangerous short-term impact. On a 10 year time frame, methane is more than 100 times more potent as CO2. Despite its short term impact, most governments still consider only its 100 year impact, where methane is only a 21 times more powerful greenhouse gas than CO2 (even the 20 year impact is 86 times higher than CO2).

Howarth's explained, that methane leakage and emissions today occur in far higher quantities than previously thought: up to 12% leakage from shale-gas and 4% from conventional gas (and the Oil and Gas industry invests almost nothing in reducing methane leakage). In the short term, this heavily outweighs any reduction of greenhouse gas emissions commonly used in comparisons between gas and coal.

The urgency of the situation around current methane leakage and the implications of proposed new infrastructure cannot be understated, according to Howarth. At current rates, our planet will be locked into 1.5 degrees of warming in just 10 years and we are scheduled to blow past the 2 degrees "Red Line" for the planet in just 30 years.

Howarth emphasized the urgent immediate need to address methane for its short-term impacts: while the impact of reducing CO2 may take 40 years before it t is felt, increases or decreases of methane have *immediate* effects on our atmosphere, as it persists in the atmosphere only 12 years. As such, methane can play a crucial role in either keeping global ecological systems away from, or pushing them towards, crucial ecological tipping points. "The only way we are going to keep the earth below two degrees is by reducing methane emissions. We cannot do it by reducing CO2 alone." Pressuring governments and actors (such as the UNFCCC) to use short-term methane Global Warming Potential numbers in their short-term goals could be a clear demand.

"Methane emissions are critical; no way we can reach COP21 targets without them. This is a bridge to climate disaster." Methane is not the solution but part of the problem, because of its powerful Global Warming Potential and its potentially catastrophic impacts on the climate in the short-term. In this context, "It makes no sense to be building out new (gas) infrastructure."

Europe's global gas grab

Internal European gas production capacity is extremely limited compared to its demand. Europe's largest gas fields are in Groningen (Netherlands). Here, in collaboration with Exxon and Shell the Dutch state, low quality gas for domestic heating in the Netherlands, Belgium and France has been produced since the 1970s. The example of European production is notable, as shown by Liz Main from GroenFront! and Peter Polder from Milieudefensie, because it illustrates the level of damage that gas extraction can entail, with over 100,000 people living in damaged houses from countless earthquakes provoked by gas extraction in the region in the last 10 years alone.

Currently the EU imports 38% of its gas from Russia, 32% from Norway, and 12-14% from Algeria. Main importing countries are Germany, the UK, Italy, France, The Netherlands and Spain, though the individual national situations vary greatly inside Europe (ex. Spain's gas based on LNG imports while Germany's is almost entirely imported through pipelines).

European gas imports feature a large amount coming from North Africa, most prominently Algeria, and EU's second largest supplier outside the region after Russia. It holds the 3rd largest global reserves (after Argentina and China). Currently, Algeria accounts for 12-14% of Europe's gas imports (10% of total consumption), and in 2014, 87% of its gas went to the EU (via Spain). Gas plays a vital role in Algerian economy with 60% of budget revenues, 30% of GDP, and 97% of export earnings. More gas infrastructure would lock the North African gas into the European grid, for example with the pipeline MIDCAT between Spain and France.

A powerful presentation by Hamza Hamouchene from War on Want framed the politics around North African gas as little more than a thinly disguised gas grab, pushing a new wave of resource neo-colonialism by excluding North African communities largely from access to, or benefiting from, the exported gas. Hamouchene quoted a local activist saying, "All the wealth is coming from under our feet, all those multinationals are coming into our country and we are not benefiting from it."

Political discussions are underway that would legally commit 80% of **Algeria**'s gas to be sold to Europe. Long-term commitments from states and countries have political ramifications as companies and countries have vested interests in maintaining the regime's power with which they have signed accords. A brief look at the region's history of energy relations with Europe shows this to be the norm rather than the exception. BP (then Total and Arco) signed gas deals

in Algeria in the 1990s; just 3 years after the coup, following IMF imposed shock therapy. The neo-colonial injustices of Euro-African gas relations can be seen in France's diplomatic support of Total's heavy involvement in developing fracking in former colonies such as Algeria; while in Total's home country of France fracking is prohibited.

Similarly, **Tunisia** has two important gas reserves, and was the first country to sign an association agreement with the EU, essentially "Putting interests of European security above issues of Tunisian people," noted Hamza Hamouchene. British Gas holds 100% interest in the Miskar gas field and produces 60% of Tunisia's domestic gas at Miskar and Hasdrubal fields; selling Tunisian gas to Tunisians as if it were an imported commodity.

North American LNG imports are beginning to play a role in the European energy mix. Three shipments of LNG already arrived on European shores in Portugal, Spain and Scotland. The specific dangers of this imported methane gas are the heavy environmental and climate impacts associated with fracking and gas itself. Howarth estimates the methane leakage at around 12% for LNG from the USA (extraction, domestic transportation, and a further 2-6% methane leakage from transatlantic transportation). This places imported fracked gas among the most dangerous fossil fuels.

In **Sweden**, among others, there has been a push for the construction of new LNG terminals, as it tries to move away from its dependence on the Nord Stream pipeline and Russian oil. All over Europe, various LNG terminals are planned, being built or have been completed in the last few years.

In addition, a series of major infrastructure projects are underway to bring gas from Central Asia to Europe, namely the Southern Gas Corridor (called by resistance movements the Euro-Caspian MegaPipeline). This pipeline would stretch 3,500km from **Azerbaijan** to Italy, crossing 6 countries (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Greece, Albania, Italy). The industry projects the pipeline starts moving gas by 2018, becoming fully functional by 2020. Additionally, there are plans to extend it farther east into Turkmenistan by passing under the Caspian Sea. Because of the complications of a multi-state megaproject, it has been broken down into different parts (TANAP, TAP, TCP), and construction has already started in Greece and Albania, and construction by BP in Azerbaijan and Georgia is very far along.

According to industry plans, this massive pipeline would have moved 1,000 billion cubic meters of gas which, by 2050, would be 2 billion tonnes of CO2 pumped into the earth's atmosphere (not including methane leakage and its impacts!). Emma Hughes from Platform London argues, "It's quite clear that the Southern Gas Corridor ignores all the climate science. What we are looking at is a huge fossil fuel lock-in, and infrastructure we don't really need. Gas demand is dropping in Europe, so this risks becoming a stranded asset."

Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria and Czech Republic, where Russia has a large influence and gas is predominantly used for household heating, are also increasing their gas infrastructure, with little organized resistance.

At last, the MIDCAT Pipeline was presented by members of a new grassroots Spanish group forming around this pipeline. This short pipeline of 235 km between Hostalric, **Spain** and Barbaira, France would be the final puzzle piece needed to directly connect the North African gas infrastructure (and consequently the fracking infrastructure in development) directly to Central Europe. The first section of this pipeline (Martorell to Hostalric) has already been constructed, with almost no community consultations or respect for environmental protection, and the second section has just been re-approved as a PCI with approximately 475million Euros from the EU, 160million from Spain, and 320 million from France. "Stopping this pipeline is a chance for direct North-South solidarity" said one presenter, "this could have direct impact upon slowing fracking in the Sahara and supporting all the people who depend upon the aquifers beneath the sand for their survival."

Resistance on a global frontline

The European and global repositioning towards methane has massive impacts on our planet's geopolitics and our shared atmosphere. On the local level, grassroots resistance against gas projects is rising across the globe. While there is a common enemy for these struggles, each region has its own intricacies, and a wide gap in approaches to resistance between the Global North and the Global South needs to be acknowledged (and addressed).

Jane Kleeb from Bold Nebraska shared strategic learnings from the historic win against the **Keystone XL pipeline in Canada and the US**, which denied its improbable odds and went on to create one of the biggest climate and environmental wins to date. The campaign built a broad coalition, farmers, ranchers, native tribes, environmentalists and many more with a clear focus on directly pressuring President Obama, forcing the issue both a moral and political decision. They began talking with farmers around issues of safety, and used images of what could be transported through their land. "It made them feel responsible for supporting their allies up north," explained Jane Kleeb. They provided legal support to landowners to resist being forced to sell their land. As the pipeline route would cross the Ogalia aquifer, they had a clear focus on water, and used every legal delay possible. Importantly, Kleeb noted, the campaign never shied away from climate, knowing that the companies they were fighting would later use it against them, telling the locals that outsiders were using their local issue for their own agenda.

One of the key lessons from the Keystone XL resistance is the importance of creating space for local grassroots groups to lead in national politics, and this meant to decentralize non-profit

funding structures that traditionally afford only the largest groups access to engage in national issues. Another major lesson was about organizing with unions, who have fought for decades for the conditions now afforded to them in established industries, such as the fossil fuel sector. Renewable jobs, Kleeb explained, simply do not offer the same hard-won benefits. A challenge in this work was acknowledging the reality that in a climate-conscious economy, many of the fossil fuel union's jobs will simply cease to exist.

Stories from resistance along the **Euro-Caspian Megapipeline** route came from a series of fact-finding missions conducted by Platform London in 2016. They found that in the countries they visited there was very little information available about the pipeline, despite violations taking place to get access to land from the subsistence agriculture communities. A loss of land would certainly lead to displacement. While there are many sites of localized resistance, they are not connected, or even aware of other resistance.

In **Azerbaijan**, human rights abuses associated with the Euro-Caspian Megapipeline are perhaps the most alarming, Emma Hughes explained. Protests are violently broken up, and journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists regularly put in prison. Since Aliyev's regime came to power, European money for fossil fuels has played a crucial role in maintaining the regime. Within a few months of coming into power, Aliyev signed contracts with 11 oil companies. This revenue and the political support that accompanies such projects (especially from the UK due to BP's large involvement) have been crucial for further entrenching the regime, especially since oil started flowing in 2006. However, those most impacted often receive nothing of the money that enters the country.

In **Turkey**, fewer companies are involved in the project, so there is more space to damage the companies' reputation. There is a quite strong resistance of farmers in the fertile agricultural lands in **Greece**, organizing around the threats of pipeline leaks. As 70% of land owners in Greece have not signed contracts with companies, the celebrated opening ceremony of the pipeline may represent a slightly "biased interpretation of reality", commented Hughes. Politically, Syriza is in support of project, and the Greens are resisting.

Resistance against the pipeline in **Italy** started in 2012, Elena Gerebizza from Re:Common explained. Local economy is based on small-scale tourism and agriculture mainly, and people did not accept an imposed industrialized economic model. "It's just a change in people's lives they don't except". Already more than 40 municipalities have rejected the project and don't want negotiations or compensation from the Swiss-based consortium. Grassroots movements successfully delay the construction process through questions around permits. A major anti-corruption investigation is underway whereby an Italian MP reportedly took a bribe of over 2.3 million euros from an MP of Azerbaijan.

In **North Africa**, grassroots movements to protect land and water from the dangers of gas extraction and infrastructure are on the rise. The unemployed movement in Ouargla, **Algeria**,

has led an uprising by victims of fossil capitalism who see extraction but not benefits. In 2015 there was a popular uprising in Ain Salah of people resisting fracking to protect their water and livelihoods. Fortunately, large scale plans of fracking in the Sahara have been temporarily stopped due to decrease in global oil prices, but these plans may surface again.

In **Tunisia**, Petrofac has announced it will leave the country, and has already dropped its plans in the islands, claiming the state isn't doing enough to repress the protest movement, such as the unemployed graduates organizing, which resulted in two months of peaceful sit-ins. Hamouchene noted, there is "a complete lack of transparency" with prohibitions on Tunisians entering into some areas where multinationals are operating.

Enrique Viale from the Argentinian Association of Environmental Lawyers, reported from local resistance in **Argentina** where over 1000 fracking wells exist today (mainly run by Chevron, but also by Total, Wintershall, Shell, Dow Chemical, Pie, Exxon, Gazprom, Chevron, Magdalena, Petrobras, and numerous others). Most of the fracking sites are located around a gas formation the size of Belgium in Vaca Muerta. They mainly provide energy for the growing mining industry. To create a pro-fracking boom social consensus in Argentina, it was introduced tactfully, stressing its financial benefits, and framing the desert area of Vaca Muerta as an empty zone, denying a long history of indigenous communities and underplaying the sacrifices of the current agricultural communities will face with the fracking boom.

The fracking boom occurred so quickly in the area of **Vaca Muerta (Argentina)** that the industry cannot deal with the contaminated water. Lorena Riffo from the National University of Comahu and activist at Tierra para Vivir explained what this means for the population. The fracking sites are mostly situated in the poorest rural districts, and water contamination puts an additional stress on their lives. Local groups are starting to develop anti-fracking campaigns. They inform about the dangers of fracking and organize Toxic Tours, bringing people to the affected local indigenous communities to see the damage with their own eyes. Up to now, 55 municipalities have successfully banned fracking, based on a precautionary legal framework, but claims to ban fracking in the actual gas zones have been overruled, referring to the law that communities don't have rights to the subsoil.

Resistance to gas is mounting also in Europe. **Portugal** has resisted gas prospecting and is looking into an energy transition to replace lots of jobs in the fossil fuel sector. In **Spain**, Catalan towns are tired of fighting constant mega projects, and municipal fracking bans have been overturned as unconstitutional. There has been good success with organizing Toxic Tours, and new momentum is rising around resisting the MIDCAT Pipeline. In Groningen, **Netherlands**, local communities organize around human rights issues, motivating people to take back more responsibility for their own lives, as they aware that any quick transition would create solutions and problems.

In the North and the South, we can see commonalities and the importance of understanding the gas boom as part of a lack of sovereignty of people over their own lives and their local environment, especially in places with limited democratic space. Hamza Hamouchene suggested to understand the lack of autonomy in the Global South as energy colonialism, giving the most blatantly example where European corporations conduct practices in the South prohibited in their own countries. Pascoe Sabido of Corporate Europe Observatory added, "This is less an issue around energy, than democracy."

Alternative energy futures

We must know what energy systems we are advocating *for* when we advocate against gas as a "perfect partner of renewables". Pascoe Sabido from Corporate Europe Observatory described the strategic shift of the oil and gas industry away from climate denier to part of the solution, so that they can stay in the game. This involves larger changes: many oil majors are shifting portfolios, acquisitions and investments towards gas, simply because they realize the fossil fuel age is over. Pascoe Sabido suggests; the industry is willing to sacrifice coal and hype gas to maintain investor confidence.

This has led to a slow takeover of the Renewables Lobby by the Gas Lobby in the EU, leaving a serious vacuum of political space for advocacy around alternative energy systems. In addition, fossil fuel companies increasingly produce renewables themselves, notably large scale wind and solar. New EU directives favour these by supporting tendering and auction models, which "may kill community power" by adding further difficulties for small scale renewables (such as heat pumps).

Lucile Daumas from Attac Morocco provided a useful case-study of renewable transition in the South. **Morocco**'s energy dependency is currently 96%, but has the opportunity to decrease. The major renewable projects are, however, carried out hand-in-hand with large private corporations. The development of mega solar farms with 500,000 solar panels has created a number of problems: lack of local consultation, questions over debt payments, social and environmental issues such as water scarcity. Additionally, much of the renewable energy from mega solar farms will be for export, while fossil fuels will continue to provide for local energy consumption.

Molly Walsh of Friends of the Earth Europe introduced into the discussion about what energy systems we want, asking: "What is energy democracy?" Walsh proposed: "Energy democracy is about control over our means of energy productions, it is about fair access to energy for all, and it is about communities taking responsibility for producing the energy that they need and doing so sustainably." In closing she added, "There is plenty of sun falling on our planet, what matters, is: how we organize that system."

The group agreed that technologies that can accompany a transition to energy sovereignty must be locally specific. In the debate, wide support was given towards heat pumps and storing energy in the form of heated water to build resilience into renewable grids. But often, energy democracy is not a question of specific technology, as one participant remarked, "The population is for wind power; they protest against commercial investor wind projects. This is a silent protest against neo-capitalism and multinationals." One must also ask "for what is this energy used?" as, "A huge amount of energy goes to industry to produce things we don't need".

Ideas for networking, campaigning and action

A goal of the conference was preparing pathways for collaborative action. In four working groups, ideas were developed on EU policy, for action and campaigning, to challenge mainstream narratives of gas, and on alternative energy systems. Concrete strategies for movement building and better communicating the dangers of methane were discussed, research needs and immediate policy targets identified, and the importance was stressed to further strengthen North-South solidarity and supporting groups in the South by telling their stories. Enrique Viale from Argentina urged, it is "very important that you, here in Europe, having the tools, contribute to and incorporate this in your work".

Overall, high interest was expressed in identifying specific projects to work on collectively, to tangibly tell the story of the European gas lock-in, to engage in symbolic and iconic struggles and communicate better "what sort of energy model in what sort of world we want." (Elena Gerebizza). Because "The violence of climate change is not natural but is instead comes from a set of choices made by those in power." (Hamza Hamouchene).

Conclusion

As Europe transitions its energy systems in new directions many other transitions take place simultaneously. While gathering to discuss the threatening gas lock-in, we arrived at a collective understanding that it is not only essential how Europe gets its gas, but how Europe and European companies relate to the rest of the world. This includes traditional forms of colonialism, exploitation and extraction, but also the global climate consequences as they impact those who have contributed the least to causing this crisis.

It is the hope of those who were present that this gathering marks a turning point, because if we are able to take out the fossil fuel industry's bridge, it may lose its lifeline to the future.

The diversity of groups present showed that by organizing together we can be more than the sum of our parts, reminding local organizers that they are informing and supporting a larger fight, and connecting policy activists to on-the-ground struggles and stories. Collectively, this organizing work supports our movement by creating mutual feedback loops between local and regional struggles and allowing us to collectively share in our victories.

Tackling gas is no small feat. Gas is perhaps the last stand for the fossil fuel industry to maintain shareholder confidence despite the knowledge that 80% of known fossil fuels must remain in the ground, they know it, and will fight tooth and nail to stay alive. But while their resistance to deep change may be massive, we have never been so close to uprooting the energy systems that have powered neoliberalism for the past century.

The science around the dangers of methane as a greenhouse gas means, rather simply, we have no choice but to take this on. If we can slow the gas escaping into our atmosphere, we may just be able to buy ourselves a crucial decade or two in which we have the time to curve our planet's fate away from the dangerous tipping points.

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