

External Shocks and Governmental Responsiveness to Public Opinion. A Case Study of Nuclear Energy Policy after the Fukushima Disaster

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Laura Morales, Daniel Bischof, Maarja Lühiste and Luca Bernardi
University of Leicester

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- To what extent are democratic governments responsive to citizens' demands and preferences between elections?
- Are governments more likely to be responsive to the interpretation of public opinion through surveys or to collective and publicly expressed opinion – generally in the form of protests?
- What happens when both forms of expression of the public mood are in clear contradiction?
- Goal of the paper: a first and preliminary attempt at addressing these questions with a comparative (pilot) study of governmental reactions and responses to multiple forms of expression of the public's views and preferences, using the case of nuclear energy policy after Fukushima.

KEY NOVEL ANALYTICAL ASPECTS

(1) Going beyond standard approaches to ‘public opinion’:

- Standard definition of public opinion as ‘what the public believes and what it wants from government’, BUT we are interested in different forms of expression of the public mood: surveys vs collective action.
- Departure from exclusive focus on ‘median’ voter to include the ‘vocal’ voter.

(2) Refining our understanding of ‘responsiveness’:

- Should governments pay attention to demands between elections?
- Importance of the role of ‘mandates’.
- Study of ‘normal’ and ‘unexpected’ decision-making junctures.
- Dynamic understanding of responsiveness at the level of policy formulation.

WHEN WILL GOVERNMENTS BE RESPONSIVE TO THE PUBLIC OPINION?

NORMATIVE & EMPIRICAL ISSUES

- Representation, responsiveness and ‘unexpected’ policy-making junctures
 - Responsiveness as defining feature of democratic representative government
 - Three problems for normative and empirical analysis: mandate vs independence, diversity of constituents’ views, how to learn about their views.
 - Non-mandated or ‘unexpected’ situations/external shocks as especially interesting ones.
- Responsive to whom?
 - Weighting views of ‘median’ voter and ‘vocal’ voter problematic in itself
 - Amplification mechanism important: consistent messages should trigger responsiveness

WHEN WILL GOVERNMENTS BE RESPONSIVE TO THE PUBLIC OPINION? NORMATIVE & EMPIRICAL ISSUES (CONT.)

- When are governments *likely* to be responsive?
 - Govts have a preferred policy in most cases: under what conditions will they change course?
 - Govts as ‘anticipators’: reaction contingent; relevant factors = saliency of issue, size of potential electoral loss, closeness to elections.
 - But Govts also constrained: policy-making process related, external constraints (reputation, contracts), internal party/coalition constraints.

WHEN WILL GOVERNMENTS BE RESPONSIVE TO THE PUBLIC OPINION?

NORMATIVE & EMPIRICAL ISSUES (CONT.)

- Behavioural expectations
 - Absence of protest → no incentive for responsiveness
 - If substantial protest consistent with 'median' voter → responsiveness much more likely.
 - If substantial protest but inconsistent with 'median' voter → reaction conditional on single vs coalition govt and if protesters in line with 'core' voters.
 - Above expectations conditional on how close election day is.
 - Also, conditional on external and internal constraints.

CASE SELECTION, DATA & METHODS

- Nuclear energy policy after Fukushima as a (pilot) case study
- Eventually, data on a medium-large number of cases (13) for this study: only 9 now completed (rest by Spring)
- Cases with & without nuclear energy, but at least a debate, included (Table 1)
- Own manual coding of initial policy positions, event history and final reaction/result
- Multiplicity of sources: news wires, survey reports, parliamentary questions, legislation databases, newspaper editorials for 2 newspapers in each country
- Unit of coding and analysis: an “event” = claim, statement, action
- Up to 3 actors coded per event

Table 1. Criteria and classification for case selection

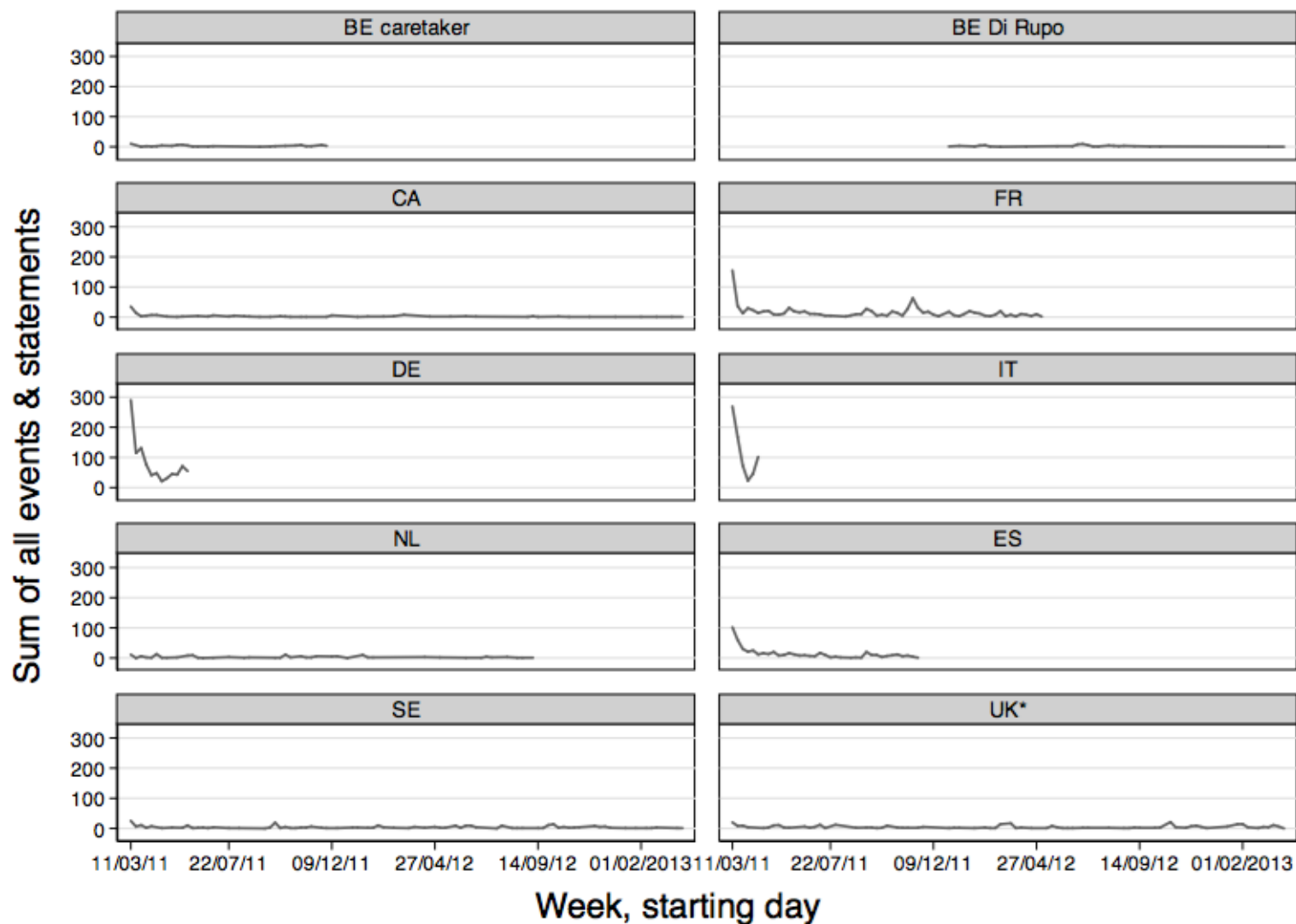
		Debate prior to Fukushima	
		YES	NO
Nuclear energy prior to Fukushima	YES	(1) Belgium Germany Spain Switzerland	(2) Canada Finland France Netherlands Sweden United Kingdom United States
	NO	(3) Australia Italy	(4) Austria Cyprus Denmark Greece Ireland Iceland New Zealand Malta Norway Portugal

Sources: Kriesi (2013); Aarts and Arentsen (2013); Swyngedouw (2013); Bern and Winkel (2013); Country reports of the World Nuclear Association; ReponsiveGov data collection.

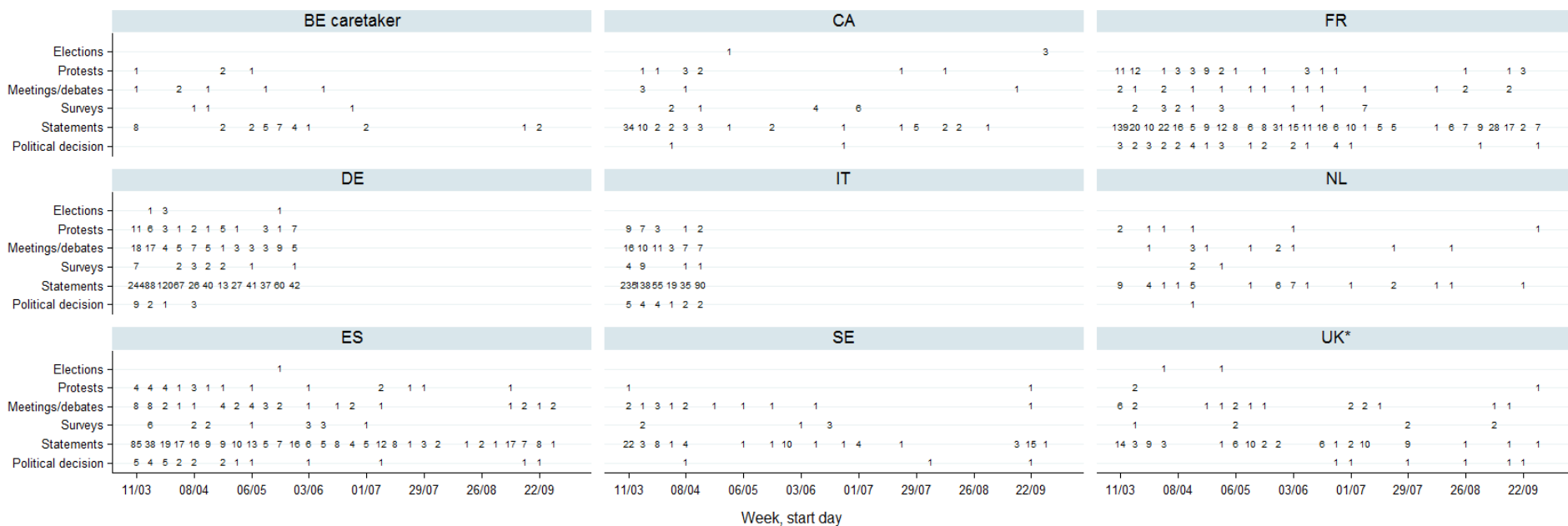
PRELIMINARY RESULTS


- Data still being produced, so results are mostly descriptive and still preliminary
- We can only partially address research questions and hypotheses with limited number of cases, though still more cases than ‘traditional’ comparative studies of 3-4 cases
- Data complete for BE, CA, DE, ES, FR, IT, NL, SE, UK (still coding for AUS, CH, FI, US)
- With these caveats in mind...

Figure 1. The evolution of the public debate around nuclear energy throughout the whole period, by country



* Data incomplete




 Figure 3. Evolution of pro- and anti-government events in the first 6 months, per country and week

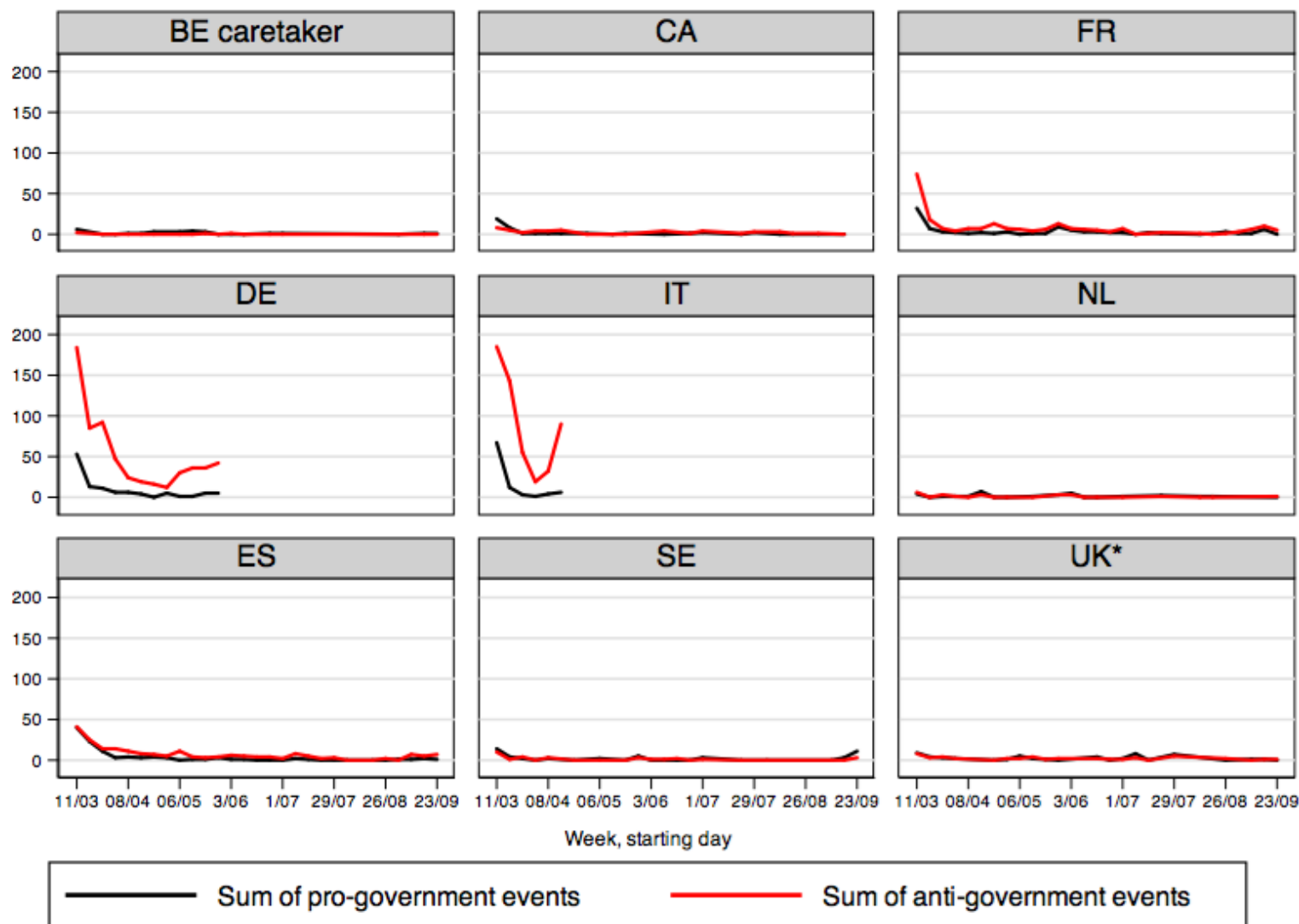
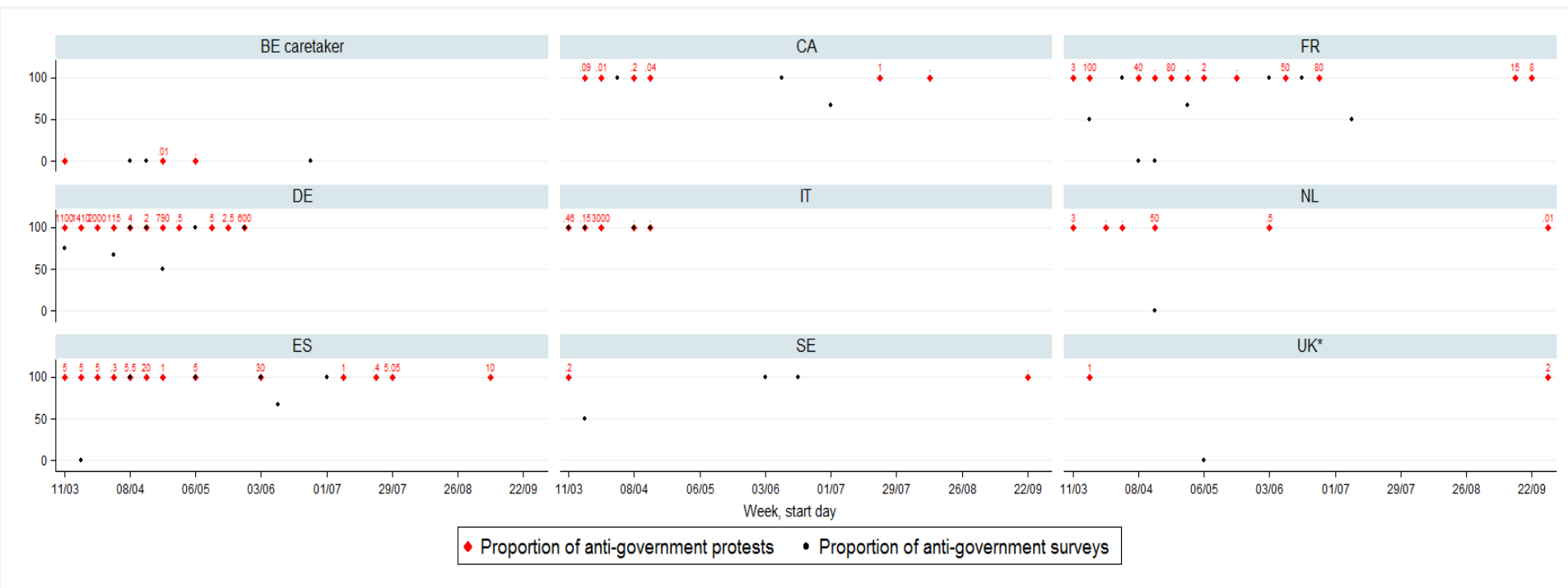


Figure 4. Nuclear energy policy position of protesters and general public during the first 6 months, per country and week



PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Table 3. Patterns of protest and consistency of the vocal and median voters, and responsiveness outcomes

Protest	Consistency vocal & median voter	Case	Outcome
Intense	Yes	<i>Italy</i> <i>Germany</i>	Substantial policy responsiveness (4) Substantial policy responsiveness (4)
	No		
Moderate	Yes	<i>Spain</i>	Rhetorical responsiveness (2)
	No	France	Rhetorical responsiveness (2)
Negligible	Yes	Belgium <i>Canada</i> Sweden	Counter-responsive move No reaction (0) Increased attention to the issue (1)
	No	Britain Netherlands	Increased attention to the issue (1) Increased attention to the issue (1)

In Italics, countries where local/regional elections took place just a few months after March 11, 2011.

- Effect of protests (H1): small protests in BE, CA, FR, ES, SE, NL, UK and govts did not change position; large in DE & IT and govt changed. [consistent with expectations]
- Effects depending on consistency with surveys (H2 & H3): in IT & DE, overwhelmingly consistent and govt changed course. [in line with expectations]
- Effects dependent on closeness to elections (H4) and constraints (H5): mixed findings: IT case consistent with expectations, DE only for closeness to elections.

These are preliminary and rest of cases needed for more robust conclusions. More to follow soon!

Project website with papers, data
codebooks and intermediate findings:

<http://www.responsivegov.eu>

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THANK YOU!