

# The War in Ukraine: A Process Sociological Perspective on How We Got Here

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ALEXANDROS KOUTSOUKIS, APR 1 2023

**This article is part of a series on process sociology, which was compiled and edited by Alexandros Koutsoukis and Andrew Linklater (before his untimely passing).**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been described as the return of geopolitics, the return of 19<sup>th</sup> Century imperialism or as a struggle between democracies and autocracies. Discussions tend to be reduced to the attribution of (direct) blame. Should one blame NATO's eastward enlargement, Putin's imperialism or autocracies' character? These questions revolve around the motivations of a major power such as Russia and the role of domestic politics in fuelling this conflict. Realists may disagree about Putin's motivations, but realism at its heart is a perspective that sees a world characterised by the recurrence[1] of *realpolitik* and, thus, of spheres of influence (Mearsheimer 2019). In contrast, for liberals, like Fukuyama (2012 [1992]; 2022), international politics is primarily defined by domestic politics and the character of political regimes some of which, such as Russia, are insufficiently modernised or on the wrong side of History. Despite their differences, realists and liberals perceive something similar: an almost inevitable conflict due to an aggressive great power or an aggressive autocracy. Though partially correct—NATO's expansion has been consequential, and Russia is an aggressive, imperialist autocratic state—this picture of the war in Ukraine misses some important aspects of the crisis. Process sociology can illuminate the gradual and increasing emotional and political disentanglement of Russia from the West by offering a distinct answer to the question *of how we got here*.

### The Argument

The argument offered here is that the world is experiencing the acceleration or reversal of several functional democratisation processes (to be explained below). These processes have shaped the ground for Putin's decision and the current conflagration. These processes, which are unplanned, are characterised by changing balances of power between actors (state or non-state) that make them more interdependent, by a reorganisation of social functions as a sort of division of labour, and by the gradual but slower emergence of a sense of belonging. As these processes advance, the chances of people learning to co-exist more peacefully and develop a sense of we-ness are likely to increase. These processes can happen both domestically and internationally. Internationally, it is argued, functional democratisation is proceeding more vertically in the West (e.g., US relative decline, more economic interdependence and a sense of shared destiny), but is reversing horizontally with the decreasing influence of the US and liberal norms and the rise of an authoritarian China and the so-called rise of the Rest or cultural revolt against the West (Linklater 2021, 190-193). At the same time though, this reversal is not complete. Regionally we are observing the development of ties between Russia and China in a direction that can lead to functional democratisation giving Russia the alternative to the prior Western attachments, and the respect it seeks through the symbolism of the "friendship without limits". With regards to the Near Abroad of Russia, a term used to denote the countries of the former USSR, certain post-Soviet states and in particular Ukraine have experienced 'colour revolutions' and have been moving in a more functionally democratic direction domestically or regionally toward Euro-Atlantic institutions. These changes have come to appear more threatening to Russia's illiberal establishment, which has been moving the country toward functional de-democratisation and doing so with increasing confidence. The interweaving of these processes creates the conditions though not the inevitability for Russia to see NATO's enlargement as a hostile

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*realpolitik* move of democratic states. Russia's decision to hitch its wagon to China makes its imperialist and anti-Western foreign policy to have an acceptable cost. The price for Russia's disentanglement from the West is further entanglement, interdependence and possible functional democratisation with China. The gradual development of this dual entanglement and disentanglement should be central in our explanations of how we got to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## Functional (De-)democratisation: Domestic and International Politics

To explain functional democratisation this essay draws on the process sociology developed by Norbert Elias, who took a long-term perspective to investigate societal transformations from the Middle Ages to the modern period. He examined how European state-societies came to be dominated not by hereditary elites but by recallable democratic representatives. He argued that this was the result of the advancement of a process he calls 'functional democratisation', which led to changes in the social functions of social groups, while there was a marked "narrowing of power differentials and development towards a less uneven distribution of power chances" (Elias 2012 [1970], 64; Elias 1970).

The implication is that functional democratisation is re-structuring societies, changes state-society relations as well as the interdependent relations between rulers and ruled and between different social strata across the territory or territories of the state entity. As Elias argued, this process structures change and "permeates the whole gamut of social bonds" reshaping habituated bonds of association and identification (Elias 2012 [1970], 64). Elias was concerned with the impact of changing power relations on "changing emotional dimensions of everyday behaviour [which] governed the principal social trajectories in [...] societies and [...] the wider world." (Linklater 2021, 14)

The upshot of this is that in societies in which the power gap between social classes decreases, there develops a tendency for differentiation of social functions (functional democratisation) affecting how the new state-society relations and various social strata are integrated together. The development of this type of democratisation shapes a trend for taking into account those who gain more power and those who depend on each other due to their new social functions. The winners and losers of this process are becoming forced to learn to co-exist again, though in a different way than before. Once these results obtain a degree of stability, the outcome is a new social organisation, and an emergent sense of belonging or we-ness. Having said that though, the sense of we-ness tends to lag behind as societies have to learn to adjust, the losers fight back and may develop counter-processes, and things do not happen smoothly (Elias 2012 [1970], 63-4).

The question that arises is how this applies to the international level. Two things that are key in process sociological investigations at the international level are the following. First, domestic and international politics are intertwined. They cannot be analytically kept apart as in realist perspectives that privilege anarchy or the causal weight of the international system (Hobson 2012; Linklater 2009) or in scholars of democracy in International Relations (IR), who argue "that the internal (democratic) nature of states does have a consequential impact on their international behaviour", and, thus, reproduce the supposed "strict separation between the domestic and the international spheres." (Hobson 2015, 19) For process sociologists, types of human interconnectedness are not restricted to loyalty to the state (ethno-centrism) or to one particular kind of activity, e.g., economics, politics or culture. Figuring out the dynamics of human interconnectedness lies at the heart of this perspective's research puzzles. Secondly, the recognition that human interdependences across the world create societal bonds between people. Therefore, process sociology recognises the emergent social dimension of human interdependencies or what in English School of IR is called international society (Linklater 2011, 61; 2019; 2021).

From this standpoint, functional democratisation shapes the struggle for the organisation and character of the state as well as its embeddedness in international society. As above, what is at stake is who gains power, whose role or social function becomes more influential, and whose status is being raised in the new statal organisation and in the transformed international society. As a result, a new sense of we-ness is being developed though it historically tends to lag behind the necessities created by these new interdependencies. It is not anchored on a specific meaning attributed to anarchy or human dignity as per realism and liberalism respectively. Below we offer a synoptic account of the development of functional democratisation processes that pertain to the Russo-Ukrainian war to better grasp

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'how we got here' and why this now appears as almost inevitable.

## Functional Democratisation in the Society of States

The society of states after the end of the Cold War was largely characterised by unipolarity and the emergence of a liberal standard of civilisation and associated sense of we-ness. This included international institutions dominated by Western countries, economic interdependence and standards of behaviour and social organisation like rule of law, elections and human rights. This did not create a uniform liberal international order, but an international society with regional manifestations of the liberal project (Cooley and Nexon 2020, 281).

Internationally, functional democratisation processes developed with the implosion of alternative ordering projects (Soviet communism), the rise of liberal characteristics across regions and social domains, liberal activist social movements, the division of labour shaped by economic interdependence, and the underwriting of military and security goods by the West, while the US was in relative decline.

American-led foreign military interventions as well as the rise of illiberal social forces across the world and the rise of China and the rise of the Rest have been undermining the liberal international ordering project and the liberal standard of civilisation. The current state of affairs could be described as the disintegration of international society. However, this would be a one-dimensional reading of the situation. International society is neither uniform nor destroyed either by war or outright rejection of its liberal characteristics. The current condition would be more accurately described as the re-configuration of international society or the development of new nodes and different degrees of density and types of international organisation in a network of states.

In this network, functional democratisation processes are still unfolding. They are shaped by changes in power ratios and status as well as in the emerging division of labour across countries. In the West, the US continues to underwrite security arrangements, while European countries, more focused on economic affairs and regional democratisation efforts, are also trying to take on some of the regional security burdens of the US, but without replicating NATO. In Asia, Russia and China are growing closer together with Russia becoming a central supplier of oil and gas to China, while China providing transnational infrastructure through its Belt and Road initiative and increasing political backing of Russia, and Asian politics being increasingly organised with international institutions that exclude the USA, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Cooley and Nexon 2020). Though these changes may appear to be creating regional orders in the West and in Asia this is not a foregone conclusion.

The webs of interdependence that currently exist across the West and the East have not vanished because of the war in Ukraine. The market and other institutional arrangements, rules, and various associated standards of recognised behaviour, or what Linklater has synoptically called market civilisation (Linklater 2012; Wouters 2016), continue to make states interdependent. The current international society is a blend of its previous stage, and of ongoing processes of functional (de-)democratisation.

In fact, the symbolism of a "friendship without limits" between Russia and China announced after the Beijing summit of February 2022, just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is not necessarily a cynical mask for an alliance of convenience between Russia and China. As Dmitry Trenin argues:

In the last quarter-century, China's and Russia's roles have become reversed. The most stunning fact about this role reversal is that, in this environment, Sino-Russian relations have not stopped improving.

According to Graham Allison,

Along every dimension—personal, economic, military, and diplomatic—the undeclared alliance that Xi has built with Russian President Vladimir Putin has become much more consequential than most of the United States' official alliances today.

This was also demonstrated in the recent meeting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping

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in Moscow, which showcased “burgeoning commercial ties and [...] plans to expand them” and was characterised by China as a “journey of friendship” (21/03/2023). Seen from this perspective, the symbolism of the “friendship without limits” appears to reflect and solidify the above rapprochement. The development of this relationship has been good enough to alleviate Russian anxiety about loss of status after the end of the Cold War, and not to be undermined by a degree of anti-Chinese sentiments in Russian society. The so-called Russian ‘pivot to the East’ is not fully accepted by Russian society (Dharmaputra 2021), but a 2021 poll indicated 74% favourability of China by Russians. In addition, the symbolic politics that underpin the ‘pivot to the East’ give a certain traction and sociological dimension to it. Given what we know from previous process sociological studies about the function of symbols in shaping the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and how they allow for the stabilisation of regimes and international orders, we can reach a different conclusion (Linklater 2019). The prospects of this Russo-Chinese alignment accentuating a process of functional democratisation should not be dismissed in the heat of the current crisis.

The implication of this is that the war in Ukraine has accelerated the reversal of functional democratisation in international society, but at the same time did not eliminate it, did not make China a spoiler state like Russia, and has potentially accelerated a new process of functional democratisation between Russia and China. Rather than exaggerating the liberal fear of an inevitable conflict between democracies and autocracies, process sociology helps us shed light on the importance of the qualitative characteristics of the Russo-Chinese relationship as they are being defined by a seemingly emergent process of functional democratisation. This process is invested with symbolic capital and even though Russia could be seen as the junior partner, it is one that provides essential natural resources and enjoys Chinese public respect. This process is structuring a closer relationship between the two powers, and seems to have reinforced Russia’s confidence in its ‘pivot to the East’.

This pivot appears to have provided some reassurances that allowed Russia to take the risk of invading Ukraine. In the next section we examine the impact of functional (de)democratisation processes on Russian domestic politics and its Near Abroad, and their impact on Russian threat perceptions toward liberalism and liberal states.

## Functional (De-)democratisation in Russia

Functional de-democratisation in Russia has been reinforcing the need for a ‘pivot to the East’ rather than the building of better relations with the West. The end of the Cold War led Russia to restructuring its society in a manner that could lead to liberal democracy and integration in international society. The same process was observable a few years later in its Near Abroad.

However, in due course, Russia’s functional democratisation process was being reversed. Its liberal reforms, liberal elite, and liberal ideals started losing power and influence in Russian society. The non-liberal elite was gaining power at the expense of the liberals. The transition from a state-planned economy to a free-market economy was flawed, mismanaged, reliant on a weakened state that did not deal well with criminality, and gave rise to a political establishment that increased the gap between the rich and the poor[2], centralised power and paved the way for Putin’s grip on state power. Such a high degree of functional de-democratisation and state centralisation is making the elite very influential in the shaping of the national habituated attachments that make up Russian identity or habitus. Russians’ sense of belonging and view of the world is at stake in this process.

Putin has developed a degree of influence allowing him to shape this process by managing quite effectively what Elias calls ‘group charisma’ and ‘group disgrace’ by praising Russia and stigmatising ‘other groups’ or ‘outsiders’ as inferiors (or decaying to use one of Putin’s own words) (Elias 1996, 152–55). He has referred to Russia as a state-civilisation, cultivating pride in a certain view of Russian identity distinctive for its emphasis on civilisation and the primacy of the state (Linde 2016). He has avoided injuring this sense of pride by never acknowledging or memorialising the Holodomor as a Soviet-state-engineered Ukrainian famine (1932–33). Instead, he has fomented Russian resentment for loss of great power status, and an injured sense of exceptionalism rooted in Russian history. He has addressed the fall of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. His conservative turn with appeals to ‘traditional’ rather than Western values reinforced this anti-Western geopolitical orientation (Malinova 2022). He has juxtaposed “homeland and values” with liberal democracy, woke politics and American foreign policy. He has reiterated that Russia’s “geopolitical opponents (were) aiming to tear apart Russia,

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the historical Russia". He "initiated a crackdown on organized political dissent, quietly but effectively suppressing the protest movement that had flared up in December 2011" and was undermining his popularity. He then legislated bills against non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In 2012, NGOs linked to politics in Russia were required to register as "foreign agents", and in 2015 they were designated as "undesirable" as they were deemed to pose a threat to the "foundations of Russia's constitutional order, defensive capacity and security". State-dominated media and the cult of the leader have reinforced his influence in Russian society. He has cultivated a symbolic representation of himself as a kind of hero and paternalistic relations between the state and Russian society. A wealth of past social imaginaries of Russian greatness and views of history have been selectively used as instruments for the establishment's political empowerment. For instance, Putin relies on readings of history that deny Ukrainian sovereignty, and advances a historical framing of the war in Ukraine linked to the great Patriotic War to make the war appear patriotic and existential rather than imperialist (McGlynn 2020; 2023). Of course, the war is becoming existential, but only for those who have tied their fortunes with this orientation to the world.

This gradual process of functional de-democratisation is increasing the emotional and political attachment to an illiberal political establishment, and detachment from liberalism and the liberal West. It helps us explain the brazen illiberal direction of Russian domestic politics and foreign policy. This process is not deterministic though.

As Beate Jahn suggests, Russia's democracy is not an alternative to liberalism but a different incarnation of it (Light 2013, 249). It has not erased liberals and liberal ideals or returned Russia to a Czarist type of authoritarianism. People are still protesting. Civil society's political role to monitor the state has been marginal, but till recently there was a noticeable trend that organised civil society and especially "informal protest events and spontaneous coalitions of concerned citizens [had] helped to spread civic values of mutual trust and cooperation" (Stewart and Dollbaum 2017, 218). The establishment continues repressing, killing or incarcerating dissidents, but it is also fighting for the hearts and minds of the Russian people. The new regime is far from liberal democratic, but functionally more democratic than Czarist Russia. Putin pays homage to democracy even if he does so in the breach (Fukuyama 2014). Past Russian leaders of symbolic value, like Peter the Great, an autocrat as well as a moderniser, are praised by Putin and admired not only by conservative but also by liberal Russians. This process has neither replicated the past nor revamped Russia. It has led to the emergence of a new configuration of social forces and blend of ideals.

This gradual transformation does not fit easily in narratives that privilege spheres of influence, presume a universal understanding of human dignity associated with liberalism or a teleological view of the character of authoritarian states as the antithesis of liberal democracy. Process sociology emphasises the impact of long-term processes on domestic balances of power, their degrees of interdependence with other social forces, their impact on the democratisation of social functions, and the concomitant slow transformation in people's sense of belonging.

In short, functional de-democratisation has been shaping a trend in Russia to disentangle itself from the West. However, this was not inevitable. Another type of functional democratisation reinforced this direction of change, one that bound Ukraine further into the military, economic and political orbit of the West.

## Functional Democratisation in Europe and Russia's Near Abroad

This Western orientation of Ukraine and Russian disentanglement from the West need to be understood in tandem with European functional democratisation. The European Union's (EU) integration process and enlargement has delegated particular social functions of member-states to the EU, and raised states' and societies' awareness of being caught in webs of interdependence as certain groups in member-states stand to gain whereas other ones stand to lose in role and power.

This vertical functional democratisation did not leave Russia unaffected. It has shrunk the non-liberal-democratic space in Russia's sphere of influence in its so-called Near Abroad and in particular the former Soviet and Warsaw Pact space in Eastern Europe. This process has also been interdependent with functional democratisation in Ukraine, which has developed a less hostile approach toward civil society than Russia and has allowed for EU funding of NGOs that focus on human rights and democracy (Stewart and Dollbaum 2017, 218). It is gradually integrating socially, politically and economically this European geographic space, and, in doing so, it is reinforcing the

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development of social forces in these countries with an orientation toward liberalism, liberal democracy and associated principles such as national self-determination. In other words, functional democratisation in Ukraine, and its orientation toward more national independence and rejection of spheres of influence, is being bolstered by the ongoing functional democratisation process in the EU.

It is worth appreciating that there is nothing teleological in these processes of functional democratisation that affect state-formation, democracy-formation and nation-formation. The EU is experiencing its own challenges with the resurgence of national-populist forces and the re-orientation of countries like Poland and Hungary that try to reduce the competences of the EU and challenge certain elements of liberal values, EU policy toward Russia and European integration. Rather than focusing on the EU's so-called democratic deficit that presumes an ideal or teleological view of democracy, the emphasis here is on the ongoing social transformations in the course of functional democratisation and their impact on people's orientations to the world; that is, their sense of belonging to their nation, the EU and associated beliefs about liberalism.

Similarly, post-independence, segments of Ukraine's society have been gaining in status, power, function and influence, while others have been losing, and new patterns of interdependence have been developing, which gradually have been shaping people's orientations to the world. The dichotomy between European and Eurasian orientations came to be prominent, but it was not always as polarising. The implementation of democracy is not directly responsible for this polarisation, but rather the way it has been developing. Efforts for a liberal democratic transformation and pro-European orientation can lead to counter-intuitive results such as centralisation of power around oligarchs. These may appear as a gravitational pull toward Russian authoritarianism, but such conclusions should be resisted due to the complexities of functional democratisation.

As Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union, democratic and free market reforms changed the state and social functions were democratised away from state apparatchiks. Competing oligarchic fractions stood to gain and managed to centralise authority around themselves. Their alliances with formal and informal networks of power in Ukraine led to corruption[3]. This has been interpreted to be leading by necessity to democracy, though it has given "rise to something closer to a hybrid democracy or, a system of oligarchic pluralism". This oligarchic pluralism is neither true to the ideals of liberal democracy nor a return to Soviet authoritarianism nor a necessary step toward democracy but a result of domestic power struggles of interdependent social forces in a changing political and social environment in Ukraine and the world. Specifically, these oligarchic struggles, depending on their relationships with the regions in Ukraine, fought for and against the centralisation of authority by the Ukrainian state. This transformation was further shaped by the Russian war in Ukraine since 2014, which led to the increasing influence of nationalist battalions that undermined the centralisation of authority to Kiev. Other developments though have tended to strengthen the power of the centre.

Most recently, President Zelensky, a rallying figure for the independence of Ukraine against Russian aggression during the post-2022 phase of the Russian war, saw a meteoric rise in his trustworthiness from 27% to 84%. This undermined the influence of nationalist fighting groups and of regional power. These developments followed previous transformations of state-society configurations that came about by the weakened Ukrainian state being less hostile toward NGOs and civil society, which were thus able to develop more influential social functions. This trajectory was reinforced by interdependencies with the EU and its funding toward civil society organisations. In addition, the mobilisation and momentum generated by the Orange Revolution and the Ukrainian Euromaidan movement in 2013/14, which had a much larger scope and "possessed a strong unifying momentum, [created] social capital and a sense of solidarity among large segments of the population" (Stewart and Dollbaum 2017, 218). State weakness under these conditions undermined citizens' trust in the state, but allowed civil society to gain in trust from the wider public and increase its social and political role (Stewart and Dollbaum 2017, 218; Solonenko 2015, 219-20). This does not mean that the rise of trust in civil society is a democratic panacea as civil society can also change the direction of change, if it orients itself toward regionalism and regional divisions (Stewart and Dollbaum 2017, 217). In other words, despite the history of a divide between pro-Western and pro-Russian emotional attachments in Ukraine that dovetails regional divisions, the development of state-society relations caught in a web of interdependencies and domestic power struggles led to the development and the increase in influence of a pro-Western civil society and a pro-Western state.

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These changes have been decreasing Russia's chances to influence Ukraine and accordingly Europe or to perform its own economic integration of Ukraine in the Eurasian Economic Union. Ukraine was slipping away from Russia's orbit at a time when the Russian establishment was becoming increasingly sensitive to this development.

## Conclusion

The war in Ukraine was ultimately the decision of Putin, but it has also been a decision embedded in an environment profoundly shaped by functional democratisation processes. The way these processes were interwoven, pulling in different directions, impacting on the configuration of domestic and international interdependences, and influencing people's orientations to the world, contributed to the disentanglement of Russia from the West and its more and more complex entanglement with China, that made the decision to war probable. This helps account for Putin's brazen fusion of an increasing anti-liberal rhetoric with anti-Westernism compounded by the development of a nationalist-civilisational and anti-Western vision of Russia's place in the world, that shaped Russia's threat perceptions regarding NATO and Ukraine's Western orientation.

From the perspective of this process sociological account, explanations such as "it was NATO's fault", or "Russia would not have invaded Ukraine if it had been a democracy" seem incomplete. This essay has tried instead to offer a more cautious approach, that avoids the overreliance of liberals on regime type or the transformative impact of liberalism[4], and of realists on the recurrence of *realpolitik* (Linklater 2009), that in some variations leads to a theoretical great power bias (Koutsoukis 2017), and the normalisation of spheres of influence. What it has been argued is that people's and states' orientations to the world develop in the crucible of change identified as functional democratisation processes.

Historical comparisons with past functional democratisation processes, such as that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Concert of Europe, could be the focus of future work in order to advance theoretical and policy-related insights. Ultimately, and congruent with the intense human commitment of process sociology, it is hoped that such analyses might allow us to better understand the direction of change in world politics, such as the return of geopolitics in Europe (Guzzini 2012; Coker 2016; 2019), and in the words of Richard Kilminster:

assist human beings to orientate themselves in the figurations they form together and to help them to control the unintended social entanglements that threaten to escalate into destructive sequences such as mass killings and wars (Kilminster in Linklater 2021, 23-24).

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## Notes

[1] For a critique of the 'recurrence theorem'—"the notion that certain 'propelling' principles have

ensured that the same geopolitical forces have repeated themselves over the millennia"—best exemplified by Kenneth Waltz, but not exclusively amongst realists, see Linklater (2009).

[2] According to a think tank report of the European Parliament: "Russia has gone from Soviet-era egalitarianism to extremes of wealth and poverty. Economic growth since 2000 has slightly reduced the gap between rich and poor, but inequality is still higher than in most other developed countries."

[3] This is a familiar trope according to recent research. For an excellent case study with regard to Kosovo see

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(Danielsson 2016; 2020).

[4] In European politics this view has been associated with the German policy of “change through trade”, which aims to liberalise societies and influence nationalist attachments through trade. The problem of overreliance on such ideals has been demonstrated by the Nord Stream 2 project, that has been abandoned after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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# The War in Ukraine: A Process Sociological Perspective on How We Got Here

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