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Is 'Multilingualism' taking a back seat in the EU? Time for action

1.   Prologue

This paper is based on a talk I gave at the at the 2015 conference of the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL) in Helsinki. I was invited to speak about the European Civil Society Platform for Multilingualism (ECSPM),[1] on which I am serving as one of the two EFNIL delegates and recently as its president. My talk was not intended to be a direct contribution to the topic of the conference ("Language use in public administration: theory and practice in the European states") –which dealt with the social benefits of rendering information in public documents in language and discourse that everyone for whom the texts are intended can understand (cf. Dendrinos/Marmaridou 2001). Yet the issue of intelligibility is not only about the *type of language* used in the texts of public administration, but also about *which language or languages* are used in the texts. The question about language choice is especially pertinent today in the European Union (EU), a *de facto* multilingual polity with increasingly multilingual populations. In this sense, then, the paper that follows is indeed linked to the topic of the conference, even if the link is circumlocutory. In presenting the ECSPM's roadmap, this paper makes the important point that the European Commission's interest in multilingualism is decreasing. The empirical evidence

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[1]   Member organisations of the ECSPM: Association of Language Testers in Europe, Conseil européen des associations de traducteurs littéraires, European Coordination of Independent Producers, Community Media Forum Europe, CultureLink Network, European Association for the Education of Adults, European Association for Terminology, European Language Equality Network and Eurolang, European Council of Artists, European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, Youth for Understanding, Eŭropa Esperanto-Unio, European Federation for Intercultural Learning, European Federation of National Institutions for Language, The European Forum for Vocational Education and Training, European Theatre Convention, European Union of National Institutes for Culture, Fundación Academia Europea de Yuste, Federation of European Publishers, Federal Union of European Nationalities, Literature Across Frontiers, European Platform for Literary Exchange, Mercator Network of Language Diversity Centres, Réseau européen des centres internationaux de traduction littéraire, Association des états généraux des étudiants de l'Europe, Education @ Internet, European Union of Associations of Translation Companies, European Association for Health Information and Libraries, Association of European Border Regions, Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity.

comes from the EU's public administration texts; that is, non-binding policies and recommendations in which multilingualism is increasingly construed as having to do with language teaching and learning in schools, rather than as a multi-dimensional social practice with many facets.

2.   The tensions of multilingualism

In the complex setting of the EU's public administration, European Commission officers – commonly lacking expertise in language policy and cognisance of the deeply political and ideological nature of language-related matters – are empowered to take decisions concerning language(s) and language learning and to plan and execute policies designed to "promote multilingualism and linguistic diversity." For many of those officers, who are also charged with organising projects and events around languages, the promotion of multilingualism means forging the Barcelona objective of "mother tongue plus two foreign languages for every EU citizen" – not necessarily in a politically sensitive manner – while multilingualism is ideally equated with polyglotism. In my own experience with high and low ranking officers in the Directorate General of Education and Culture (DG EAC) with whom I have had the opportunity to collaborate – who increasingly have a background in economics and finance, rather than in language or cultural studies – the image *par excellence* for this concept of 'individual multilingualism' is that of a young man *[sic]* who has learnt several languages by having lived and/or studied in privileged circumstances. The common experience of immigrant youngsters, whose survival depends on communicating in more than two or three languages, is unintentionally suppressed.

"Plurilingualism" is a distinct notion from that expressed by the term (individual) multilingualism, although the discourse around language skills and competences in the Commission does not make the distinction. However, plurilingualism – referring to speakers with a multilingual repertoire who can concurrently resort to a range of resources such as different languages and other modes of "meaning making" including images, gestures, sounds, etc. to achieve optimal communication – is an expedient concept. Defined in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001: 4-5) and in various publications (e.g., Bernaus et al. 2007; Dendrinos 2004, 2012), this concept could prove especially useful in language education policies and recommendations for multilingual classrooms. Yet it is more or less absent from official policy texts.

Missing from most language policy texts also is the social dimension of multilingualism; that is, when more than one or two languages have official status in a community, or when languages have different functions in a society. "Social multilingualism" is lost in the mist of "linguistic diversity" –frequently portrayed in conflictual terms. For example, there are positive images of languages as

Europe's cultural wealth, but also negative images of languages being an obstacle to the ideal of European unity. Increased multilingualism in the EU institutions themselves is often portrayed as being unmanageable (cf. Krzyzanowsky 2010).

Conflictual EU discourses, surfacing now and again, result in debates such as whether or not only the selected 'core' languages will be the *de facto* working languages of the EU institutions. Sometimes, the conflictual discourse stems from ambivalence as to whether multilingualism is to be promoted for its symbolic or its instrumental value (cf. Moore 2011). Increasingly, of course, according to Krzyzanowsky (2014) who has, on his own and with Wodak (2011), critically analysed EU discourse on multilingualism, progressive economisation is becoming a very real part of how Europe's languages are portrayed and argued for.[2] This, I would like to suggest, is true of the discourse around education policy too. Economisation is becoming an integral ingredient of the Commission's vision for education, articulated in its Communication on "Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes."[3]

This document on educational reform in Europe, which silences the cultural value of education and emphasises its economic and instrumental value for the job market, has been criticised for this very reason by the ECSPM and for additional reasons by the civil society for life-long learning (EUCIS-LLL). It has even been the subject of criticism from the European Trade Union Confederation, who in their position paper (5-6/3/2013) remind the Commission that

> the role of education is much broader than simply fulfilling the economic targets of European and national strategies and this kind of rethinking or redefining of the purposes of education is unacceptable. It underlies the fact that education should prepare individuals both for life and for the labour market and it should be independent from continuously changing economic and ideological objectives. (European Trade Union Conference position paper March 5-6, 2013)

As the economisation of the discourse on languages and education is intensified in Europe, as well as in the US;[4] as reforms in education are ever more focused on providing young people with the skills they are supposed to have to find a job in

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[2]   The discourse is similar in the USA, where Americans' foreign language deficit – as serious as that of the British– is beginning to be represented as an important economic barrier. This is the reason why the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has recently formed a national commission to examine the current state of language education and conduct the first recent national study on foreign language learning in the USA. The foreign language crisis in the USA was the starting point in the public talk I was invited to give at the Department of Applied Linguistics of the University of Massachusetts, under the title "Global economy and the urgent need for languages: American and European responses to foreign language learning exigency" (19 November 2015).

[3]   Commission COMM (2012) 669 final, Strasbourg, 20.11.2012.

[4]   We read on the US Committee for economic development's webpage: "In order for America to succeed in the 21st century, our students must receive a well-rounded education that includes high-quality language learning [...] As we move to reform education in this country,

the global market-place; as the role of the English language in development and economic growth is becoming naturalised; and as concerns about greater efficiency and competitiveness become obsessions, the ECSPM may have an important part to play.

The timing for new efforts from the ECSPM is crucial, because there seems to be a consistently decreasing interest in multilingualism in the European Commission. As noted by de Vries on the website of the "Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity" (NLPD): "The Commission has gone from having one entire portfolio on Multilingualism (Leonard Orban 2007-2010), to a Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth (Androula Vassiliou 2010-2014), to no portfolio on Multilingualism." Interestingly, when Jean-Claude Juncker took up office as president of the Commission, the unit dealing with 'Multilingualism Policy, Skills and Qualification Strategy' was moved from the Directorate General of Education and Culture (DG EAC) to the Directorate General of Employment. What is more, the multilingualism policy officers were transferred to a section of a unit of the DG EAC, entitled 'Schools and educators; multilingualism'.

De Vries goes on to note that the NLPD "shares the Commission's view of stimulating growth and jobs in the current economic and social scenario and believes that languages can greatly contribute to stimulate Europe's economy" but that it also "needs to remind the Commission that all European languages – official languages as well as regional, minority and small-state languages – serve for much more than economic purposes. The new Commission's focus on multilingualism gives a utilitarian, market-oriented approach to the languages of Europe, which will only prioritize big, hegemonic languages and will leave a remarkable number of lesser-used languages – small-state, regional or minority language – aside."

3.   The (dis)engagement of the European Civil Society Platform for Multilingualism

The launch of the ECSPM in 2009 was acting upon the Lisbon Treaty, which introduced a new form of political participation in the democratic life of the European Union: 'the citizen's initiative' (Art. 11[4] TEU). According to Diamandouros (2010: 19),[5] this was to make an important contribution to the empowerment of EU citizens, provided it meant seeking genuine dialogue and debate on policy with civil society organisations, which might sometimes disagree with or criticise institutional decisions.

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the US must continue to learn from the best practices of other countries in order to deliver a world-class education that prepares American graduates to be linguistically literate and culturally competent." (https://www.ced.org/policies/education/category/foreign-languages).

[5]   Nikiforos Diamandouros is a former European Ombudsman.

The role of the ECSPM was linked to the European Commission's 2008 Communication on "Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment". Unlike more recent Commission statements which concentrate on *jobs and economic growth*, this focused on *people* and more specifically on people's "ability to use several languages, to access culture and participate as active citizens, benefiting from better communication, wider employment and business opportunities."[6]

With the support of a body such as the ECSPM (consisting of non-governmental organisations and networks active in the support of EU languages, the promotion of linguistic diversity in formal and non-formal education, culture and the arts, the media and other sectors of the civil society in Europe), the Commission aspired "to help Europeans understand that the EU's linguistic diversity is an asset rather than a barrier, and find ways to manage intercultural dialogue." The Mandate issued by the Commission required the civil society body that was formed to work collaboratively, with a view to:

– raising awareness of the value and opportunities of the EU's linguistic diversity;
– encouraging the removal of barriers to intercultural dialogue and social inclusion;
– achieving the Barcelona objective to communicate in two foreign languages in addition to one's mother tongue.

The partner organisations were organised into four working groups that met regularly in Brussels, with travel and accommodation subsidy from the Commission, "to participate in structured dialogue concerning multilingualism" on the basis of the priorities set out at the ECSPM inaugural summit and to propose ways for

> 1) promoting multilingualism for social cohesion and intercultural dialogue; 2) providing opportunities for migrants to learn the language of the host country and to cultivate their own at the same time; 3) taking advantage of the media which have the potential to open channels for intercultural dialogue; 4) enhancing multilingualism policy to secure the rights of all European languages; 5) securing lifelong language learning opportunities for all citizens. (European Union 2012: 5)

Following the submission of the ECSPM's recommendations regarding these issues to the Commission,[7] just before its first Mandate was terminated, a thought-provoking paper was written by Suzanne Romaine (2013), setting out a question about the role that the ECSPM might play in creating "a more coherent and

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[6]   COM (2008) 400 final, Brussels, 16.7.2008 (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52008DC0566)

[7]   Available at: www.poliglotti4.eu/docs/publications/CSPM%20Pol icy%20Recommendations _FULL%20VERSION.pdf.

holistic EU policy on language and multilingualism," which several scholars of multilingualism have argued is needed (Krzyzanowsky/Wodak 2011; Moore 2011; Phillipson 2011; Wodak 2009). Romaine (ibid.) maintains that the EU's decision to launch a civil society platform for multilingualism could prove important, because it "heralds a potentially momentous sea change" regarding EU language policy. She also poses an interesting question in the same paper, wondering if the ECSPM will manage to redefine the role played by multilingualism in identity-building, both in terms of actual multilingual communicative practices and the symbolic meanings attached to multilingualism by civil society and EU institutions. Her question is still valid and even more timely than before, given that the sought-after European identity[8] has become very fragile, battered by the economic and refugee crisis in the Schengen zone. What Wodak (2008) calls "communicating Europe" is proving to be increasingly challenging.

Before the ECSPM was officially re-launched in 2012, a few of its members went into partnership to secure an EU-funded project through the Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme. The Poliglotti4.eu project, as this was called, was aimed at "systematically considering multilingualism and developing/implementing appropriate multilingual policies at grass-roots level everywhere in Europe," and focused on three areas of civil society, involving "a large proportion of the population that is not in formal compulsory education: lifelong learning; pre-school; social-community services for social inclusion, so as to continue its work to promote multilingualism by way of following European policy developments." But the activities of the Poliglotti4.eu project[9] *followed* EU policy developments rather than questioning them or acting in a systematic fashion to promote the Commission's 2008 stipulations regarding multilingualism. And this despite the fact that these were progressively being abandoned, as the global economic recession and Europe's economic crisis were affecting the meaning of multilingualism, trapping it in the EU's discourses of escalated economisation and its larger political projects (cf. Krzyzanowsky 2010).

With the 2012 Mandate, the ECSPM was engaged to act "in a way that aligns with the new challenges and priorities that the European Commission has outlined for the coming years, with a special concern for considering the new Erasmus+ programme, as well as the Commission's Rethinking Education strategy".

Extending its partnership from 22 to 29 organisations so as "to bring know-how and enhance the Platform's scope", the ECSPM was asked to function as "a forum for the exchange of best practices in early and life-long language learning, in language teaching and learning within formal and non-formal education settings, in language use by the media and institutions aiming at the dissemination

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[8]   There are numerous published works resulting from research on the discursive construction of European identity; e.g., Weiss (2002), Oberhuber et al. (2007), Strath/Wodak (2009).

[9]   To be accessed from www.poliglotti4.eu.

of cultural achievements, as well as by translators and other civil society stake-holders". It is clear that the ECSPM was being directed away from policy issues, as it was required to perform tasks which were of interest to the DG EAC, to which the ECSPM was assigned,[10] and through which funding was then made available for two assemblies a year to discuss the issues on an agenda prepared by the unit dealing with Multilingualism policy issues. The tasks were the following:

– to exploit innovative ways for the development of language competences with a view to achieving the Barcelona objective of "mother tongue plus two" for every European citizen;
– to extend good practices linked with early language learning to other levels of education with special regard for vocational education and training, as well as to adult learning;
– to help the elimination of linguistic barriers for the purposes of mobility particularly for disadvantaged groups through strategies that could be in-cluded in a policy handbook regarding migrants' linguistic integration and social inclusion;
– to facilitate the exchange of information on accessible language learning resources;
– to expand opportunities for social and professional mobility through language acquisition;
– to explore the possibility of forming a language knowledge alliance;
– to explore how to best make full use of the Erasmus+ programme.

The period between 2012 and 2013 was particularly important, because a number of substantial EU-funded language-related projects that had been sponsored by the Commission had come to an end. I am referring especially to the *European Survey of Language Competence* and the *Language Rich Europe* projects. Unlike other more scholarly undertakings – such as the DYLAN project[11] – the results of these, and of the 2012 opinion poll published in the *Eurobarometer,* were widely disseminated by the Commission and used to support what seemed to be turning into the major focus of EU multilingualism policy: "learning two languages in addition to the mother tongue."

Undoubtedly the period between 2012 and 2014 was crucial for the Com-mission's altered stance on multilingualism, encoded in its new-fangled represen-

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[10] The ECSPM was directly linked and reported to the 'Skills and qualifications strategies; Multilingualism policy' unit, which provided it with management services and supported the funding of assemblies in Brussels and members' participation in events organised in different places in Europe to celebrate multilingualism.

[11] DYLAN: a project funded under FP6 of the European Union, embracing 20 research institu-tions in 12 European Countries which ran for five years (2006-2011), and sought "to identify the conditions under which Europe's linguistic diversity can be an asset for the development of knowledge and economy" (www.dylan-project.org/).

tations. The slogan appearing on the Commission's languages-related web page changed from "Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment" to "Supporting language learning and linguistic diversity." This re-branding mirrored a definite shift from promoting multilingualism as an aspect of the "unity in diversity" ideal to the practicality of foreign language skills. Complementing this expediency with a market-value label on it were two other important initiatives. One was the mustering of all old mobility programmes into one basket called Erasmus+, which "aims to modernise education, training and youth work across Europe." The second large-scale initiative was the "Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes" declaration. This second initiative steers Europe towards "investment in education and training for skills development" because it is "essential to boost growth and competitiveness." In articulating what the usefulness of languages in education is, the "Rethinking education" document assists the multilingualism re-branding process, now stripped of its symbolic value, just as languages are: "In a world of international exchanges, the ability to speak foreign languages is a factor for competitiveness. Languages are more and more important to increase levels of employability and mobility of young people, and poor language skills are a major obstacle to free movement of workers. Businesses also require the language skills needed to function in the global marketplace."[12]

The Commission's new policy-in-practice appeared on the DG EAC's webpage, where it states that the EU's multilingualism policy now has 2 facets: "to help support the learning of languages across Europe, and to promote linguistic diversity (http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/index_en.htm)."[13] Though this was a crucial period for multilingualism, especially because of the increasingly narrow definitions of it, for the ECSPM it was a period of inactivity. The member organisations collectively were rather disoriented, as they were trying firstly to understand and interpret what the Commission expected of them, and secondly to negotiate expectations regarding their role.

When I was elected president in 2014, several important changes had already occurred, and many of the symbolic attributes of multilingualism had already been purged. Multilingualism is now linguistically constructed as a state of "having the language skills and competences necessary for a knowledge based economy."

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[12] Commission COMM (2012) 669 final: 5.

[13] With regard to language learning, it is stated that "one of the EU's multilingualism goals is for every European to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue" and it recommends that children are introduced to two foreign languages in school from an early age (because "better language skills enable more people to study and/or work abroad, and improve their job prospects" and because it helps them "trade effectively across Europe"). It also endorses the "innovative, scientifically proven methods of speeding up language learning with content & language integrated learning (CLIL) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL)".

The information collected from an open-ended structured questionnaire which I distributed to ECSPM members, regarding what each considered as the most important and realistic tasks to be undertaken, was not put to use, as the ECSPM were first waiting to find out where we stood with the Commission, given that the previous Mandate was expiring. It was important to understand our relationship with the Commission; whether our services were in demand; and whether we would have funding for meetings and working sessions.

Aware of a reduced interest in our contribution, and still unsure about where we stood, I made an effort in my new capacity as president to negotiate with officials in the Commission a new role for us and a different, more economical way of operating. Instead of spending money to bring all delegates of member organisations to Brussels, I suggested that we be partly funded to develop an electronic platform on an ECSPM website to be designed with the intention of functioning as an advocate for a multidimensional notion of multilingualism (in education, in the public space, in arts, culture and translation, in the media and technology). In submitting a written proposal for this, I recommended that the e-platform could be home to a forum operating as a "Multilingualism Alliance," and also contain an e-repository, with powerful searching and easy key-stroke editing, to store, classify and disseminate information, policy and other language related documents; recommendations about language teaching, learning and testing; research findings; scholarly publications and results of EU-funded languages, as well as social practices in EU member states that promote multi-lingualism in different ways. Our new role would be to advise the Commission on language policy issues and assist in implementing the 2008 multilingualism policy in a politically sensitive manner, acting as mediators between the EU polity and national authorities.

Several months of administrative changes within the Commission passed before I received a courteous message informing me that there was a shared view in the Commission that the ECSPM "in its present form and structure has outlived its role" and that, in the time that had elapsed, the Commission had developed "bilateral contacts with several members on various topics that concern individual organisations." Therefore, it concluded that "the DG EAC does not think it is necessary to renew the Mandate of the ECSPM but wishes to pursue cooperation with civil society organisations in the field of language teaching and learning in more flexible ways; confirms its interest in remaining in contact with individual member organisations that have an interest in promoting language education along the lines proposed; invites these organisations to propose contributions to the September edition of the School Education Gateway and to the Commission's social media channels; will open the possibility for relevant organisations to participate in one or several events and network fora". Furthermore, the message provided information about the priorities of DG EAC in the field of language policy for the period 2015-2017, outlining their priorities as follows:

- To increase the efficiency of language teaching by supporting the introduction of innovative methods such as CLIL, the use of ICT and new media;
- To improve the relevance and comparability of language testing, including promoting the use of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*;
- To support schools in making better use of migrant and minority languages and providing support to learners with special linguistic needs, also to make schools more inclusive;
- To support language teachers and the language competences of other teachers;
- To explore the potential of bilingual teaching options in regions whose inhabitants use more than one language;
- To promote the introduction of language learning and multilingual awareness in early childhood education and care.

4.   Moving into the future

Even though the ECSPM has no renewed Mandate, it is still considered a partner of the DG EAC (http://ec.europa.eu/languages/information/csp-contact-list_en.htm). However, it is now independent from a directive and this may very well be a 'blessing in disguise', as the proverb goes. It necessarily exerts pressure on member organisations to reconsider their collective role as a civil society platform – the emphasis being on *civil society* rather than on *platform,* so as not to obscure the meaning of what a civil society body is and what it is supposed to do. That is, a civil society of organisations and networks with expertise and know-how is not merely a podium to voice opinions. Rather, it is a sphere of social interaction between a national (and in this case a supranational) state on the one end and organised groups and institutions independent of the state on the other. The latter function on a voluntary basis and at least to some extent they are self-reliant.[14] Such a body usually includes non-governmental organisations, but also independent mass media, think tanks, academic units, and other social groups that form a dense, diverse and pluralistic body – such as the ECSPM – functioning as a partner in governance. The idea of partnership implies that a civil society is not in tension with the state (or in this case, the supranational state – the EU

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[14] The concept of civil society can be traced back to Western antiquity (when it was used as a synonym for the 'good society' and Socrates taught that conflicts within society should be resolved through public argument using 'dialectic', a form of rational dialogue to uncover truth). Though its role in the political sphere has been ardently debated, in the 20th century civil society has increasingly been called on to justify its legitimacy and democratic credentials. In the 1990s, with the emergence of nongovernmental organisations and new social movements (NSMs) on a global scale, civil society became seen as a key terrain of strategic action to construct 'an alternative social and world order'.

administration) even when it criticises it, but, acting *independently* of it, its role is to make governance at all levels more accountable, responsive, inclusive, effective, and hence more legitimate. Moreover, a successful civil society, formed by organisations that have common needs, interests and values, develops through a fundamentally endogenous and autonomous process, controlled neither by the public sector (administration in governance) nor the private sector (businesses and corporations). When it is controlled by either side, it is doomed to fail in its mission. Civil societies can be successful and play a leading role in activating citizen participation in discussing, shaping and/or influencing policy.

The challenge presently facing our civil society body – whether it remains intact with its present partner organisations or it is enriched with new or alternative membership – is to understand how its role was limited by its dependence on the governing administration and to decide how to redefine its role as a vital social agent contributing to the shaping of a more inclusive language policy and facilitating the implementation of the EU multilingualism policy in a politically sensitive manner. To respond to this challenge, I have put forth a proposition that our member organisations contribute annually a small amount to be used specifically for the design, development and maintenance of a website which will allow us to be visible to stakeholders and EU officials, and which will contain an e-platform that can facilitate economically viable electronic communication between partners and an enlarged body of professional organisations concerned with the theory and practice of multilingualism.

The ECSPM now has an official secretariat in Copenhagen, Denmark, and is aspiring to have a statutes plan in the near future. Those contributing to the website development will collaborate in setting the revived ECSPM's priorities, which may coincide or depart from the priorities of the DG EAC or of other DGs that we will be approaching for collaboration when our website has been established, and we are in a position to present and promote what we stand for. Finally, I have accepted the challenge of setting out to the delegates of our member organisations a proposal that will be a point of departure for our collective action plan. This will focus on issues that deal with the following four wideranging areas from the perspective of multilingualism: 1) Languages and language policy issues, 2) Language teaching, learning and assessment, 3) Translation, terminology & ICT, and 4) Arts, culture, media & publishing. ECSPM member organisations work in one or more than one of these areas.

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