

THE INVOLVEMENT OF STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS IN MANAGING THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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ABSTRACT

The Republic of Moldova faced one of the largest waves of refugees per capita in Europe with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. Since the beginning of the military conflict, more than 750,000 people from Ukraine have entered the Republic of Moldova. This impressive number of Ukrainian refugees included mainly women, children and the elderly, who needed increased social protection and assistance.

In the context of the new conditions, the Republic of Moldova had to adapt to the new realities rapidly. Our country offered shelter to thousands of refugees, at the same time continuing to protect its own citizens, etc. All these challenges were taking place against the background of tensions caused by the pandemic and the energy crisis. State and non-state actors (international organizations, civil society organizations, ordinary citizens) – all mobilized, including voluntarily, to support the authorities to cope with the large flow of refugees. The grassroots actions of state and non-state actors were essential, emerging from the need to intervene as soon as possible.

In this article we propose to analyze the role of the involvement of the main state and non-state actors in managing refugee crisis in the context of the war in Ukraine. We insisted on presenting not only the results and the basic areas on which certain actions have been taken, but also to highlight some challenges and recommendations that should be taken into account.

Key words: *Ukrainian refugees, war, (non) state actors, crisis, involvement, Moldova, challenges, results.*

Introduction

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens have had to leave their homes and country to save their lives from Russian bombing. As the war is in full swing, and its end is not foreseen, some of the Ukrainian refugees have decided to return home, to their country of origin. Others, on the contrary, chose to go to other European Union states.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some refugees are coming into Moldova to receive assistance and then subsequently returning home to Ukraine, sometimes with this process happening multiple times. This highlights the importance of distribution assistance equitably between the two countries¹.

Results and discussions

About 102,000 people still remain on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. This indicator represents approximately 4% of the Moldovan resident population. Of these 102 thousand Ukrainian citizens, more than 11,000 applied for asylum to the Moldovan authorities². At the same time, the Ukrainian refugees remaining in the Republic of Moldova asked the Moldovan authorities for accommodation and help. To meet the demands of the refugees, 130 provisional centers and temporary refugee placement centers were opened. In all centers, refugees from Ukraine were accommodated free of charge and had access to all necessary services,

¹ *Moldova: Needs Assessment of Older Refugees*. Published on 14.09.2022. p. 2.[on-line] <https://Moldova%20-%20Needs%20Assessment%20of%20Older%20Refugees%20-%2014%20September%202022.pdf> 7 p. (Accessed on 14.01.2024)

² Urușciuc E. *Câți bani s-au adunat în 2022 pentru sprijinul refugiaților ucraineni din R. Moldova*. Published on 24.01.2023. [on-line] <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/c%C3%A2%C8%9Bi-bani-s-au-adunat-%C3%AEn-2022-pentru-sprajinul-refugia%C8%9Bilor-ucraineni-din-r-moldova/32237333.html> (Accessed on 01.12.2023)

including the Internet. Thanks to the involvement of external partners and civil society organizations, all centers were provided with food. If necessary, they have been offered primary, emergency or hospital medical assistance. Also, for the management of the refugee crisis, the Republic of Moldova received considerable medical donations - equipment and medicines necessary to assist all patients both from Ukraine and Moldovan citizens.

Moldovan ordinary citizens did not remain indifferent either. Tens of thousands of families opened the doors of their homes to relatives and friends from Ukraine or to people they never met before but decided to help.

The international community offered support to the Republic of Moldova in managing the refugee crisis. During 2022, about 217 million lei (10.5 million euros) were collected from donations on the account opened by the Ministry of Finance. On the governmental line, donations have arrived from the governments of USA, Italy, Sweden, Norway and Japan, Sweden, Lithuania, Switzerland, Estonia and Slovakia.

Additionally, huge contributions - about 290 million dollars were collected from external development partners through the United Nations Office in the Republic of Moldova. These funds were managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other UN agencies. A huge role has been played by the UN Refugee Agency, which since the beginning of the war has provided financial assistance to refugees from Ukraine. According to available official data, around 67,000 refugees benefited from this assistance³. Alongside, the World Food Program financially supported host families from the Republic of Moldova. Refugees from Ukraine are still invited to access the website *dopomoga.gov.md* for useful information or call the hotline 0 800 800 11, which is ready to provide informational assistance to Ukrainian refugees⁴.

More specifically, if in 2022 about 42 governmental and humanitarian partners combined their efforts to provide Ukrainian refugees with protection services and humanitarian support in all sectors, then already in 2023, a group of 73 partners committed to collaborate in order to guarantee that refugees and the general population of the country receive the protection, safety and continued assistance they need. In principle, the programs were focused on providing the basic needs of refugees: food, shelter, drinking water, clothing and medical assistance⁵.

Since the first day of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, the European Union together with its partners have mobilized their resources to come up with a prompt response to the pressing needs of the Republic of Moldova and the refugees from Ukraine. The assistance included financial support, but also essential goods for citizens of Ukraine who arrived in Moldova in search of safety. Thousands of tents, technical and medical equipment, generators, hygiene products and other essential goods have been provided through the *EU Civil Protection Mechanism*. Some of them remain stored in a warehouse set up with EU support for a new wave of refugees.

The more than half a million refugees from Ukraine and the intensification of goods traffic from the neighboring country have put pressure on the border system. In order to supervise and facilitate the flow from the borders, the European Union signed with the Republic of Moldova an agreement on cooperation in the field of border management, which allowed the mobilization of the teams of the European Agency for Border Police and Coast Guard (Frontex) on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, the supervision borders, in collaboration with the Moldovan authorities, and assistance in the collection and exchange of information.

The European Union has undertaken a series of complex measures in strategic areas affected by the war, including food security, which has been severely affected by the war. The

³ Stercul N. *Provocări și limite de oportunități în gestionarea crizei refugiaților pentru „o țară mică cu o inimă mare”*. Published on 17.01.2023. [on-line] <https://nordnews.md/provocari-si-limite-de-oportunitati-in-gestionarea-crisei-refugiatilor-pentru-o-tara-mica-cu-o-inima-mare/> (Accessed on 14.01.2024)

⁴ *Supportul Republicii Moldova pentru refugiații din ucraina după jumătate de an de război* Published on 24.08.2022. [on-line] <https://gov.md/ro/content/suportul-republicii-moldova-pentru-refugiati-din-ucraina-dupa-jumatate-de-de-razboi> (Accessed on 13.12.2023)

⁵ Olari V. *IPIS: Situația refugiaților din Moldova. Cum să ajuți, fără să dăunezi*. Published on 19.06.2023. [on-line] <https://soros.md/victoria-olari-ipis-situatia-refugiatilor-din-moldova-cum-sa-ajuti-fara-sa-daunezi/> (Accessed on 24.12.2023)

European Union signed transport agreements with Ukraine and Moldova that facilitated the traffic of goods, providing an immediate solution for the economies of the two countries. The initiative provides the expansion of four transport corridors to Moldova and Ukraine which will further contribute to the exchange of goods with the EU and foster the food security in the region, but also the rehabilitation of Ukraine's transport infrastructure.

At the same time, the European Union increased the export quotas for seven categories of Moldovan agricultural products, in order to support local farmers and exporters who lost access to traditional markets due to the war. The Republic of Moldova was offered the opportunity to export a larger volume, double for some products, without customs duties. At the beginning of 2023, the European Union announced a new package of macro-financial assistance of about 145 million euros⁶. The assistance is intended to help Moldova cover part of its additional financing needs in ensuring economic stability and the continuation of reforms⁷.

In line with humanitarian, food and security assistance, it has been aware that state authorities facilitate the socio-economic integration of Ukrainian refugees settled in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, with the help of financial support given by the external partners to Moldovan local and national authorities it has been possible to respond quickly to the new context and the emerging needs of refugees. It was also recognized the importance of giving refugees the opportunity to become self-reliant and resilient by promoting their integration into Moldovan society and economy.

Relevant local actors have gained a full understanding of refugee needs and existing local capacities to manage the flow of refugees. In particular, **local authorities** strengthened their capacities to respond to the flow of refugees and ensure peaceful coexistence in their communities. Digital solutions have been implemented to accelerate digital transformation, which provided assistance to all people in Moldova, including refugees. At the local level, it was possible in several communities of the country to improve the energy efficiency of several kindergartens, contributing to the reduction of thermal energy costs and improving access to medical services and facilities in educational institutions for children, including refugees. It has been renovated and equipped with medical equipment needed by some local medical centers, facilitating access to medical services for local community members and hosted refugees. A coordination unit and a call center were established within the Congress of Local Public Authorities of Moldova (CLPA) to ensure effective coordination and communication between local and national authorities. Several meetings, consultations and information activities were facilitated to support the response of local public administrations to the refugee flow⁸.

At the national level, the **Government** of the Republic of Moldova, by establishing the *Single Center for Crisis Management*, provided all necessary support to the Ukrainian refugees and manage humanitarian crisis in the Republic of Moldova. The centre has a green line and citizens from Ukraine may ask questions to learn details on they can get help in the emerged situation. The cells from Moldovans and refugees have been more dedicated to specific tasks: goods, accommodation, medical assistance, transport, food products, psychological counseling,

⁶ *Un an de război în Ucraina. Cum Republica Moldova a făcut față provocărilor generate de invazia Rusiei în țara vecină?* Published on 24.02.2023. [on-line] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/moldova/un-de-r%C4%83zboi-%C3%AEn-ucraina-cum-republica-moldova-f%C4%83cut-fa%C8%9B%C4%83-provoc%C4%83rilor-generate_ro?s=223 (10.01.2024)

⁷ *UE-Moldova: Comisia propune majorarea asistenței macro-financiare pentru Moldova cu până la 145 de milioane de euro.* Published on 25.01.2023. [on-line] UE-Moldova: Comisia propune majorarea asistenței macro-financiare pentru Moldova cu până la 145 de milioane de euro - EU for Moldova (eu4moldova.eu) (Accessed on 05.01.2024)

⁸ *Consolidarea capacității de reziliență a refugiaților ucraineni în Republica Moldova, a comunităților-gazdă și a autorităților locale și naționale din Moldova.* [on-line] <https://www.undp.org/ro/moldova/projects/consolidarea-capacitatii-de-rezilienta-refugiatilor-ucraineni-republica-moldova-comunitatilor-gazda-si-autoritatilor-locale-si> (Accessed on 20.12.2023).

consular and legal services, volunteering platform, coordination of the economic agents and international assistance⁹.

Also, it was found in the first weeks of the crisis, that just mobilizing society to support refugees is not sufficient. Public policies at the state level were needed to facilitate the access of refugees to the social services available on the territory of the Republic of Moldova and their integration into the social protection system. Thus, several projects were implemented that focused on the development of the *first social services platform* in the Republic of Moldova, in order to provide the necessary information to Ukrainian refugees. The platform is available in Romanian, Russian and Ukrainian languages and is committed to contribute to the exchange of opportunities to quickly identify the necessary social service near the location of the potential beneficiary and to allow quick access to the services available throughout the country. At the same time, the information available on the platform has been disaggregated by districts, cities and villages and has become accessible to any person interested in identifying the services they need, in the locality where they live or are located.

Another strong action undertaken for the benefit of Ukrainian refugees has been done at the **Parliament level**. In February 2023, a bill was voted to grant temporary protection to Ukrainian refugees for a period of a year. This mechanism provides a more secured legal status and allows them to gain easier access to a job and essential services such as education, health and social assistance. According to a study elaborated by the National Congress of Ukrainians, about 78% of Ukrainians in the country intended during the period of 2022-2023 to request temporary protection in the Republic of Moldova. However, most refugees encountered difficulties in the process of obtaining temporary protection, and the most frequent problem was related to obtaining proof of residence.

From March until June 2023, more than one hundred thousand refugees settled on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Only about four thousand managed to obtain temporary protection. Moreover, the civil society drew the attention of the state authorities that the decision of the Commission for Extraordinary Situations to limit the period of stay of refugees without protection or right of residence to 90 days may negatively affect the majority of refugees. There is a risk that refugees with an expired stay will look for alternative methods of extending their stay in Moldova, thus placing themselves in a semi-legal zone, devoid of any protection. Due to the importance of this mechanism, it is essential that the state, through government actors, civil society, together with institutions involved in humanitarian aid to refugees, work together to simplify the procedure for obtaining temporary protection, but also to provide assistance to refugees in the application process. Otherwise, the program risks failing in its early stages and causing more problems than solutions¹⁰.

In practice, people who request temporary protection will be able to obtain an identity document, issued free of charge, for a period of a (one) year. This document issued to Ukrainian refugees contributes to ensuring and guaranteeing their right to non-return to the country of origin, the express establishment of rights to accommodation, social, medical and educational services and measures, ensuring protection against abuse, exploitation and discrimination¹¹.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the Government of the Republic of Moldova has been committed to guarantee the access to education for children from refugee families. Because the Ukrainian authorities facilitate and encourage the continuation of studies of refugee children in Ukrainian educational institutions through online education, the authorities, together with development partners and on the platform of the Single Crisis Management Center, have ensured

⁹ *Single Crisis Management Centre set up in Moldova*. Published on 28.02.2022. [on-line] <https://gov.md/en/content/single-crisis-management-centre-set-moldova> (Accessed 28.12.2023)

¹⁰ Olari V. *IPIS: Situația refugiaților din Moldova. Cum să ajuți, fără să dăunezi*. Published on 19.06.2023. [on-line] <https://soros.md/victoria-olari-ipis-situatia-refugiatilor-din-moldova-cum-sa-ajuti-fara-sa-daunezi/> (Accessed on 24.12.2023)

¹¹ *Refugiații din Ucraina vor beneficia de protecție temporară în Republica Moldova*. Published on 18.01.2023. [on-line] <https://gov.md/ro/content/refugiatii-din-ucraina-vor-beneficia-de-protectie-temporara-republica-moldova> (Accessed on 23.12.2024)

free access to the Internet in the Placement Centers for all refugees from Ukraine. Moreover, in more than 10 temporary placement centers with an increased number of children, classrooms were created by equipping them with computers and furniture¹².

At the same time, with the support of foreign partners, in a short time it was possible for members of the local community and Ukrainian refugees to benefit from improved access to the infrastructure of social services. Care centers for the elderly were established to provide essential day care services for potential beneficiaries, including refugees.

Another great step undertaken to facilitate the socio-economic inclusion of refugees from Ukraine in Moldova is referred to the development of the concept *Social Tension Monitoring Mechanism*. It started to be implemented in 2023 and aims to identify, in the early stages, the potential tensions in society, including the refugees in host communities. The mechanism also focuses to identify the intervention points for mitigating these risks; reducing the pressure on households and host communities, which were simultaneously facing a complex energy, food and high price crisis, and strengthening social cohesion and peaceful coexistence between refugees and members of host communities. The assessment of capacities, needs and experience of local public administrations in managing the flow of refugees was carried out.

Thus, we can conclude that the central authorities of the Republic of Moldova mobilized all available resources to manage the refugee crisis, to provide them with the necessary assistance and to reduce the pressure on the socio-economic system of the Republic of Moldova. The policy developed at the state level facilitated, to a considerable extent, refugees' access to social services available on the territory of the Republic of Moldova and their integration into the social protection system.

The slow response of the authorities to certain problems is largely due to the lack of experience in managing and regulating the refugee crisis, the difficulties of the economic situation at home, as well as the limits of their own capacities and resources. In the process of developing an active response to the refugee crisis, as well as sustainable and consistent approaches to solving problems in this field, the need to use the accumulated international experience, the implementation of advanced practices, policies and programs is becoming more and more evident. Consistency of actions, strategic communication at all levels, coordination of implemented initiatives, as well as solidarity and distribution of responsibilities are extremely important. Not less important is the aspect regarding the integration of refugees, their introduction to the labor market and providing them with the necessary means of living conditions¹³.

Currently, the Ukrainian refugees are able to access livelihoods and assistance provided by **the National Agency for Employment (NAF)**. NAF through its local agencies provides job search services, including information, counseling, labor market mediation, as well as training and retraining services for refugees from Ukraine. With the support of the State Chancellery of the Republic of Moldova and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the association's activity has significantly contributed to increasing the information of the refugee community regarding vocational training services and employment opportunities. Thus, interested people from Ukraine have been already completed training/retraining courses (in the fields of cooking, pastry, manicure and pedicure, massage, tailoring and bartending). This successful achievement helps them integrate easier into the Moldovan labor market. Overall, during the year of 2022, 139 employers from the Republic of Moldova have offered Ukrainian refugees more than 2,100 jobs in IT, construction, engineering, tailoring, trade, health, education, catering and other fields of work¹⁴.

¹² *Suportul Republicii Moldova pentru refugiații din Ucraina după jumătate de an de război*. Published on 24.08.2022. [on-line] <https://gov.md/ro/content/suportul-republicii-moldova-pentru-refugiati-din-ucraina-dupa-jumatate-de-de-razboi> (Accessed on 13.12.2023)

¹³ Stercul N. *Provocări și limite de oportunități în gestionarea crizei refugiaților pentru „o țară mică cu o inimă mare”*. Published on 17.01.2023. [on-line] <https://nordnews.md/provocari-si-limite-de-oportunitati-in-gestionarea-crizei-refugiatorilor-pentru-o-tara-mica-cu-o-inima-mare/> (Accessed on 14.01.2024)

¹⁴ *Moldova Refugee Response: Inclusion and Livelihoods Working Group, Co-chaired by the State Chancellery and UNDP, Issue Brief #5 15 June 2022 [EN/RO]*. Published on 20 July, 2022. [on-line]

Since March 2022, the employment process for Ukrainian refugees has been facilitated. According to the data of the National Agency for Employment, until September 23, 2022, 793 citizens of Ukraine found a job on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, of which 600 were women and 193 were men. 591 people found a job in Chisinau, in Balti – 27, in Ungheni – 19, in Cahul – 17. More than 400 people registered at the territorial subdivisions of the Employment Agency to benefit of assistance in employment in the field of work. These indicators are explained by the fact that most refugees are women and children. The government also provided access to education for refugee children. At the same time, the issues of women's employment on the labor market in the Republic of Moldova, the issue of women's safety in temporary shelter centers, the availability of adequate living conditions, the availability of assistance and the urgent needs of families until the receipt of humanitarian aid, still remain completely unresolved¹⁵.

The local private sector has been also empowered and strengthened to provide employment for vulnerable people. Thus, following the support given by local private companies active in the fields of agri-food, IT and textiles, new jobs were created.

Moldovan civil society organizations (CSOs) played a huge role in managing the refugee crisis from the first day of the war. In the Republic of Moldova there are no registered organizations whose only purpose resides in providing humanitarian assistance. In the context of the new tremendous and unpredictable conditions caused by the war, many CSOs adjusted their programs and learned on the fly how to offer assistance to refugees as effectively as possible.

The CSOs involvement was more voluntary, helping the refugees get accommodation at the Placement Centers, located in various communities of the country. The representatives of CSOs were involved in campaigns for collecting and providing food products, personal hygiene kits for women and children, etc. Also, ordinary Moldovan citizens mobilized and came directly to the centers to donate: folding beds; mattresses; blankets, pillows, towels; bedclothes; clothes and footwear; unused toys and new games; plates and dishes; personal hygiene products; detergents; diapers, tinned products; other packed food products. Children's playgrounds were also set up at the placement centers, in the hope that the little ones will forget the troubles they went through with their families.

In order to determine the problems of refugees and establish the most pressing needs they have, CSO representatives organized visits in communities. They provided food, hygiene products (including diapers for the elderly or newborns); even from the first hours of the outbreak of the war, the CSOs volunteers were present at the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, e.g. providing informational assistance, psychological support, organizing transportation to big cities of the country, offering coffee/lunches at the border, collecting and distributing aid packages for refugees across the country, etc. Overall, the assistance has been provided to the most vulnerable categories of refugees: people with special needs, the elderly, mothers with children and people whose lives were in danger due to health problems¹⁶.

Although many initiatives have been implemented in this regard by state and nonstate actors the results remain modest. At the same time, another problem is the uneven distribution of humanitarian aid in rural and urban areas. It has been noted that a big amount of refugees live in the villages, either in rented accommodation or with friends or family. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that refugees tend to be clustered around urban areas, especially in the big cities of Chisinau and Balti. It is also worth noting that Moldova is a country with significant inequality

<https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/moldova-refugee-response-inclusion-and-livelihoods-working-group-co-chaired-state-chancellery-and-undp-issue-brief-5-15-june-2022-enro> (Accessed on 14.01.2024)

¹⁵ Stercul N. *Provocări și limite de oportunități în gestionarea crizei refugiaților pentru „o țară mică cu o inimă mare”*. Published on 17.01.2023. [on-line] <https://nordnews.md/provocari-si-limite-de-oportunitati-in-gestionarea-crisiei-refugiatilor-pentru-o-tara-mica-cu-o-inima-mare/> (Accessed on 14.01.2024)

¹⁶ IVC Moldova: *răspunsul și implicarea imediată în gestionarea crizei refugiaților*. [on-line] <https://ivcmoldova.org/ivc-moldova-raspunsul-si-implicarea-imediate-in-gestionarea-crisiei-refugiatilor/> (Accessed on 29.12.2023)

between urban and rural areas. Therefore, the location has an impact on the types and amount of assistance given to refugees from both the government and other humanitarian actors¹⁷.

Problems of ensuring the rights and freedoms of refugees, by the national authorities, have become decisive, as well as the management of the situation under the conditions of the decree of the state of emergency in the country. According to the Report on monitoring the observance of the rights of Ukrainian refugees for the period May-July 2022, a significant number of problematic aspects were highlighted in the management of the crisis and the situation of refugees in the Republic of Moldova. The elaborated recommendations refer to the need to introduce some changes in the national legislation, aimed at providing additional protection of the rights and freedoms of displaced persons. A lack of unity and coordination in the actions of the authorities at national and local level was highlighted. It was also drawn attention to the fact that the actions of government structures do not have a strategic character¹⁸.

It is necessary to note the lack of an adequate level of communication between bodies at different levels, which gives rise to problems in the management of the refugee crisis, including from the point of view of human rights. A significant role in these processes is attributed to international organizations, which provide financial assistance, as well as support in the provision of social services for the benefit of refugees, the provision of food, humanitarian goods, as well as in the creation and maintenance of temporary shelter centers. State involvement in these processes was extremely slow. Fundamental is the aspect of preventing the violation of refugees' rights and the development of effective approaches, on the part of the national authorities, to the crisis management process. The problems of speeding up the regulation of standards and procedures aimed at ensuring the confidentiality of personal data also need a special elaboration. The numerous deviations from general legal norms require increased attention to the situation of displaced persons, as a result of armed conflicts¹⁹.

Conclusion

At the time of writing this article, the war in Ukraine is in full swing. The Republic of Moldova is still hosting Ukrainian refugees. More than 92 external partners are currently supporting the Government's efforts in managing the refugee crisis. The role of each international partner is essential and, their involvement and good intention are crucial.

In other words, each contribution matters, thus encouraging and helping those who need immediate financial, material or psychological assistance. In these difficult days, it is important to be in solidarity and united for peace. Because humanity needs kindness, understanding, mutual help and peaceful coexistence of all the peoples of the world.

¹⁷ *Refugiații din Ucraina vor beneficia de protecție temporară în Republica Moldova*. Published on 18.01.2023. [on-line] <https://gov.md/ro/content/refugiatii-din-ucraina-vor-beneficia-de-protectie-temporara-republica-moldova> (Accessed on 08.01.2024)

¹⁸ *Moldova: Needs Assessment of Older Ukrainian Refugees*. Published on 14.09.2022. [on-line] <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/moldova-needs-assessment-older-ukrainian-refugees-14-september-2022> (Accessed on 14.01.2024).

¹⁹ Stercul N. *Provocări și limite de oportunități în gestionarea crizei refugiaților pentru „o țară mică cu o inimă mare”*. Published on 17.01.2023. [on-line] <https://nordnews.md/provocari-si-limite-de-oportunitati-in-gestionarea-crizei-refugiatilor-pentru-o-tara-mica-cu-o-inima-mare/> (Accessed on 14.01.2024)

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