

The Ukraine War: The Impact on Ireland

Shane Doyle

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the Ukraine war on Ireland. Specifically, it seeks to highlight the response of Ireland to the war in Ukraine. It discusses the pressures placed on Irish society by the large number of refugees arriving in the country on a daily basis and the challenges this has brought to the country. The rise in social discontent is examined and the possible political ramifications of voter discontent are explored.

Keywords: Irish Society Populism, Refugees, ukraine war.

Introduction

In February 2022, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine and war broke out on European soil for the first time since the end of hostilities in WWII. The aftermath of that conflict nurtured a strong desire for peace on the continent and to a large extent this desire had been fulfilled (taking aside the Yugoslav conflict which flared up in the aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia). The post-WWII years saw the cold war develop and created a defensive minded EU. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union not only ended the cold war but it also ended the bipolar global order which in turn diluted the view within the EU and NATO that the Soviet Union was a security threat to the EU. However, while the liberal rules based order was expanding in the EU, Russia was trying to find its own place in the new world order. And while its global power had diminished it still harbored ambitions of being treated as a global power. Initially it did not seem to harbor any ill will towards the EU expansion towards the East but as EU influence gradually increased in its 'sphere of influence' and became a threat Russia began to push back. (Raik & Sild, 2023) Although the Ukraine war did seem to surprise many in the West, its beginnings were there for all to see. In 2014, Vladimir Putin decided to arbitrarily annex Crimea. Putin's reasons for doing so are well documented; defending the Russian

speaking population of Ukraine, questioning the 1954 transfer of Crimea to Ukraine, and strategic access to the Black Sea (Meniszak, 2015) but one which he often repeated is the declaration that Ukraine is a part of Russia. This last point speaks to the Russian 'claim of a sphere of influence'. (Raik & Sild, 2023) Ukraine, on the other hand, is a sovereign democracy and as such has every right to protect its borders from hostile invasion. The invasion played out on our television screens on a nightly basis, highlighted the progress of the Russian invasion, depicted ruined towns and cities and of course, the Ukrainian resistance. The destruction of towns and cities forced many of the citizens of Ukraine to seek shelter in neighboring European countries. And while Ukraine was not a member of the European union it turned to Europe for help. European countries opened their borders to thousands of Ukrainians fleeing the war. In particular, Poland accepted many Ukrainians quickly and provided whatever support was deemed necessary at the time. The Poles, having been a satellite state of the former Soviet Union, perhaps seemed to fully understand or appreciate the threat of the Russian invasion. The flight of Ukrainians from their home country continues to this day. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of December 2023, the number of Ukrainian refugees globally is 6,357,100 and 5,953,500 of them are refugees within the European Union. The majority of these refugees (nearly 1.7 million) have applied for asylum, Temporary Protection or similar schemes in Poland, and just over 581,000 in the Czech Republic. Of course, both of these countries lie to the west of Ukraine's border. While in other European countries, the situation is similar, just over a million in Germany, followed by nearly 195,000 in Italy. Ireland has had over 102,000 people apply for similar programs in 2023. Arlow & O'Malley (2023) point out that in 2022 the number of refugees taken in by Ireland, "was higher per capita compared to any other Western European country". (p.245) Although the UN data refers to the country of Ireland, it should be noted that the UK is funding the number of Ukrainian refugees in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the use of the term Ireland in this paper applies solely to the Republic of Ireland. This paper seeks to explore the unprecedented impact that the Ukraine war has had on Irish society.

Ireland & The Ukraine

Ireland and Ukraine are geographically polar opposites, the former the

most western country of Europe facing the Atlantic, while the latter is on the eastern periphery of Europe bordering the black sea and of course, Russia. In historical terms, both countries have some similarities, the Irish having been subjugated by the English and the Ukrainians having been subjugated by the Russians. Both countries also share the tragic experience of mass famine and history has reported on the devastating effect that these tragedies had on the respective countries. Ireland, referring to it as the great famine (*an gorta mor*) lost over a quarter of its population, while Ukraine, referring to it as the *holodomor* also lost a large proportion of its population. While Ireland has long been a member of the European Union, joining in 1973, Ukraine applied for EU membership in February 2022 with candidate status granted in June 2022 and accession negotiations decided upon in December 2023. (Besch & Ciaramella, 2023)

The Irish Response to the war in Ukraine

The European Union issued a EU Temporary Protection Directive which, as a member of the European Union, Ireland accepted and quickly worked to support refugees arriving in the Republic from Ukraine. In addition, it moved quickly on the spate of EU decisions which were designed to pressure Russia; the limiting of access to Russian assets and monetary deposits in the Irish banking system, prevention of access to the Swift financial payments system and of course, to refrain from importing gas from Russia. (Irish Times, 2022) Arguably, and the same is true of most European countries, the greatest response to the Ukraine crisis has been the welcome that has been extended to those refugees fleeing war in Ukraine. Specifically, the Irish government implemented the following; all Ukrainian refugees were given personal public service numbers to access social welfare benefits and public services, essentially the refugees were given access to all public services which were available to Irish citizens. In addition, Ukrainians were also allowed to work as they had a PPS number (equivalent to a social security number). The refugees were provided accommodation as well. However, welcoming such a large number of refugees in such a relatively short period of time has also brought a number of noticeable changes to Irish society. Namely, changes to the political landscape, discussions on Irish neutrality, and the rise in social discontent.

The Political Landscape

Since the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 (it became a republic in 1949), Ireland has had a number of main political parties, Fianna Fail, Fianna Gael, the Green Party, the Labour Party and Sinn Fein. Fianna Fail and Fianna Gael have been in power at different times with Labour joining the government as a minor coalition partner at times. Incidentally, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael now have formed a coalition with the Green Party since 2016 amid a move by both parties towards centrist policies which are now not ideologically driven. Both parties alternate power-sharing through alternating *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) after 2 years in office. Sinn Fein, on the other hand, is a party which is linked to the struggle for a united Ireland, it has long been the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) which was responsible for terrorist attacks throughout the island of Ireland and also in the United Kingdom. However, Sinn Fein has improved its image in recent times and now seems to have considerable political support from the general public in Ireland. In a recent Irish times poll (McQuinn, 2023), 34% of those polled responded they would vote Sinn Fein as a first preference, with Fianna Fail and Fine Gael at 20% and 18% respectively. The same poll showed that 43% of those aged 25-34 would vote Sinn Fein as a first preference. Until recent times these parties were considered the main political parties within the Irish political world. However, the number of political parties has now increased and among them are the presence of a number of far-right political parties. It should be noted that these parties don't hold any seats in the current Dail (lower house of representatives). While the presence of far-right parties has been evident throughout Europe since the 1990's and early 2000's, this is something of a recent development in Ireland. In fact, the absence of such political parties in the country has been commented on previously. O'Malley (2008) explored the reasons why such parties have not had a presence in Irish politics. Ireland's particular history with its largest neighbor has been cited as a reason, while the long history of being a country of emigrants, whereby, leaving the nation and going abroad to work and live was also mentioned as another possible reason, thereby creating a benign understanding of issues surrounding emigration. In addition, the presence of Sinn Fein was also put forward as a possible reason, with the argument being made that those people who would normally align with the far-right already align themselves with Sinn Fein,

as Sinn Fein pushes for a united Ireland. Thereby, the issue of a united Ireland is seen as pre-empting any sort of ideology concerning 'Ireland for the Irish' or nativism. However, it should be noted that this article was written over 10 years ago, at a time when the refugee and immigrant numbers were not as high as they are today.

Changing Demographics

In terms of migration to Ireland, it has been noted that net migration (the number of immigrants less the number of emigrants) reached 77,600 in the year 2023, which was a 50% increase from the previous year. It should also be noted that net migration has continued to be positive since 2015. In total 146,000 people immigrated to Ireland with a breakdown as follows; 30,000 were returning Irish, 26,000 were EU citizens and 42,000 were Ukrainians. Therefore, the number of non-EU citizens entering Ireland would be 48,000. (Central Statistics Office) The number of asylum seekers in Ireland for the year 2022 was 13,651. They came from Georgia, Algeria, Somalia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. 68% were men, 32% women and 18% children. (AsylumEurope.org) This number of asylum seekers is less than 10% of the number of immigrants which includes the large portion of Ukrainians who are classified as immigrants as they are under the EU directive. However, this number also represents a 186% increase since 2019, which was a pre-pandemic year and therefore, a like-on-like comparison can be made. (Campbell, 2023) High numbers of immigrants coming into the country with the backdrop of a housing crisis coupled with the cost of living crisis has been hijacked by some to start far-right parties, parties which are against immigrants coming into Ireland. Currently, there are three parties which are considered far-right in their ideology. These parties have only come to the fore in recent times. In particular, they have sought to benefit from the recent protests against the government plan to develop temporary refugee shelters around the country. It is perhaps no coincidence that the rise in the number of protests has happened at a time when the country is mired in a housing and accommodation crisis and the unprecedented pressures brought to bear on this crisis by the influx of 'immigrants' from Ukraine.

Populism in Mainland Europe

The rise of populism in Europe has increased in recent years, in particular, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in which the EU bailed out a number of countries, Ireland included, there was both a rise in anti-austerity politics, which could be termed populist left and also a rise in anti-immigrant politics which could be termed populist right. Significantly, quite a number of European countries have seen a rise in populist parties, populists are now in power in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Italy, with populist parties enjoying political successes in Switzerland, Denmark, Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Latvia, Sweden and Germany. (Lazar, 2021) Many of these populist right parties, while holding different views on economic policies, social policies and sovereignty, all seem to have one common denominator: anti-immigrant stances. In fact, when we consider the issue of sovereignty, a point of interest is that these parties don't advocate leaving the EU but rather are now intent on influencing EU policy from within the European parliament. While populist parties on the left seem to resent the austerity imposed on their economies by the European Troika in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The EU Troika composed of the IMF, the ECB and the European Commission demanded that some member states, mainly Ireland, Greece, Cyprus, Portugal and Spain, follow stringent austerity programs in return for fiscal bail-outs due to the 2008 financial crisis. (Bertoncini & Kreiling, 2013) The major difference between the populist left and right is that on the left an inclusive ideology open to immigration is espoused. Their supporters seemingly come from more middle class backgrounds, while supporters of right-wing populist parties tend to be more working class, less educated and viewing the world in more insular terms. In fact, the upcoming European elections are viewed with trepidation in some European countries, a recent guardian article (Jan 28, 2024) highlighted the fact that the current French President is engaged in a tricky political situation of adopting far-right policies in order to pander to the ever-rising far-right populism in the guise of Marie Le Pen's far-right rhetoric. This perhaps mirrors the dilemma that many centrist politicians find themselves facing; having to consider far-right policies in order to keep voters on their side.

So, what about populism in Ireland? The elections of 2011 and 2016 redrew the political landscape in Ireland. (Reidy & Suiter, 2017) The 2008

financial crash, subsequent recession, increased unemployment, return of emigration and the EU troika austerity measures created conditions conducive to populist ideals; there was a general mistrust of the political classes but rather than a shift to the far right or far left, there was a redefining of the political landscape with an increase in support for Sinn Fein—a left-wing party by all accounts—this increase in support could perhaps be considered a protest vote against the status quo. Sinn Fein does not espouse anti-immigrant views and the voters they are attracting are predominantly young, disenchanted voters. These voters are more concerned with the inability of successive governments to deal with the rising cost of living, exorbitant house prices and the high rental demands within the rental market than supporting the ideal of a united Ireland. Sinn Fein has made promises to tackle these more immediate concerns. To date, the nationalist vote, a vote which has much to do with Ireland's struggle for independence as opposed to the general view of nationalism, was predominantly shared between Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein. The nationalist rhetoric has specifically meant a united Ireland as opposed to 'Ireland for the Irish'. This, coupled with the fact that Ireland has historically been a country of emigrants rather than immigrants has meant that in general there has been little resentment at the number of immigrants arriving in the country. In addition, as the economy improved there was a genuine demand for more workers. While the economy improved after the 2016 elections with full employment achieved, recurring problems within Irish society have created social unrest and discontent.

Housing & Accommodation Crisis

The reliance of Europe on Russian energy has proven to be a misguided political decision on the part of many European nations. In particular, Germany's reliance on cheap Russian energy was underscored and the misguided political decisions, while admirable at the time, now seem almost shockingly careless. (Wintour, 2022) The reliance on this energy was one of the first sanctions taken against Russia in response to their invasion of Ukraine. The energy sanction fed into higher energy costs for consumers across the European bloc and this was reflected in a higher cost of living for many Europeans. This, coupled with the housing and accommodation crisis, have placed enormous pressures on Irish society, both socially and politically. The right to home ownership in Ireland has

long been a tradition in the Irish state, while other European nations have a strong rental/tenant social infrastructure, Ireland has long advocated home ownership as opposed to the rental/tenant model. In fact, according to the Eurobarometer 62% of the Irish population stated that housing was the biggest issue facing the country while overall, only 10% of their fellow Europeans stated that was the case for their respective countries (European Commission, 2023). However, homeownership in Ireland has undergone change.

According to the 2022 census, homeownership has slipped to 66% in 2022. This was 79% in 1991. In addition, the age of moving from renting to homeownership has risen to 36, up from 26 in 1991. There are a number of reasons for this shift. Namely, house price rises, high rents feeding into investor-led development (build-to-rent), and poor public housing policy. House prices are now almost 8 times the average wage in 2022, while this was 3 times the average wage in 1991. Unfortunately, house price rises far outstrip wage increases for the same period. Rent increases have encouraged the investor-led development as they see wholesale profit in the rental market. In particular, in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, the government encouraged large 'vulture funds' or global real estate funds to acquire distressed properties in bulk which are now rented en masse. The government is wholly responsible for the institutional investors pushing for higher rents in order to pay dividends to their own investors. (Lima, Hearne, Murphy, 2023) This investor-led development means less housing available to buy. Thereby, pushing people to compete for the already diminishing number of houses on the market which in turn drives up house prices.

Poor housing policy from the 1990's onwards has also contributed significantly to the current situation. (Hearne, 2023) Ireland moved away from building social housing in the 1980's, the years of the Celtic Tiger saw outsourcing to private developers, while the post-crash years saw further erosion of social housing capacity by local housing authorities. The pivot towards wealth creation through housing or the financialisation of housing as an investment vehicle has ultimately led to an inadequate supply of social housing in the country. Ireland's housing crisis has been in the making for a long time. However, the housing crisis has also fed into the accommodation crisis which Ireland is in the midst of. Currently, there are

13,000 people homeless in the state at present. (White, 2023) This number represents the number who accessed emergency accommodation, therefore, the actual number on the street is likely much higher than this. In fact, Hearne (2023) estimated that there are probably over 28,000 people homeless in Ireland today. This accommodation crisis is further exacerbated by the fact that the government cannot provide accommodation to those people arriving in Ireland as either immigrants or refugees. Recent newspaper reports have highlighted the fact that refugees were being given tents in which they could live. (Campbell, 2023))

Protests & Demonstrations

Recently, the riots in Dublin appeared on News programs around the world. Such scenes have not played out in Ireland since the troubles in the 1970's and 1980's. McDermott (2023) reported on these riots and the role of the far-right. The riots were a result of a stabbing incident in which the perpetrator was portrayed as foreign. Although it was later confirmed he was an Algerian born naturalized Irish citizen and had lived in Ireland for 20 years. Carroll and O'Carroll (2023) reference a 2019 incident in which a hotel designated to act as refugee center was set on fire, other places have also been set on fire, roads and parliament have also been the subject of protests. In December, another hotel in County Galway was also set on fire. (Mathers, 2023) Recently there have been clashes between *Gardai* (the Police) and protesters outside another refugee center in rural Ireland. These protests, many of them peaceful, all question the opening of planned refugee centers to accommodate the rising number of refugees. The number of protests and demonstrations have increased since 2022. In 2022, there were 307 protests according to the *Garda Siochana* and 64 as of March 2023 (Askew, 2023), it can be assumed that this number has increased since then. The protests seem to have increased substantially since the start of the Ukraine war and the large influx of Ukrainian refugees. The reasons behind the protests seem to revolve around a number of issues. First, the housing crisis has played a role in people venting their frustrations in public. Many people feel that the refugees are being given priority over those Irish who are on housing waiting lists. Secondly, there seems to be a lack of prior dialogue with local residents as to planned refugee center openings in local areas. Thirdly, there seems to be an element of fear due to the amount of disinformation in relation to the

type of refugee who is going to be housed in the refugee centers-namely, there is a fear of all male refugees being housed in local areas with low populations. It should be noted that while the numbers arriving from Ukraine are counted as immigrants due to the EU Temporary Protective Order, they are housed in refugee centers as well. Daly and O’Riordan (2023) note that ‘public discourse is being constructed in ways that deflect blame from such policies (housing) and onto vulnerable populations’. (p.37) As long as this continues, it seems that further tensions may perhaps be inevitable.

Irish Neutrality

Ireland has been neutral throughout the state’s history. Ireland decided to become a neutral state to primarily disentangle itself from the UK, or to remain independent from any other nation. During WWII, Ireland remained a neutral state during that conflict. The Ukraine war has not only provoked debate in Ireland about neutrality, it has also prompted other countries to reconsider their neutral stance. Namely, Sweden and Finland. Geographically both of these countries are in closer proximity to Russia than Ireland and therefore, as bordering neighbors and small ones at that, felt the need to act quickly and decisively in ending their positions of neutrality. In particular, Finland with over 1300 km of border with Russia probably feels more exposed than most. Sweden’s application has not been fully approved yet but it is expected to be accepted after receiving approval from Turkey, meanwhile Finland became the 31st member of NATO (Chatterjee, 2023) and as such are now obliged to adhere to decisions made by NATO. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that troops from both of these nations will have to participate in NATO deployments in future conflicts. Ireland has unilaterally condemned the invasion and has provided support to the thousands of refugees in Ireland. However, the proximity of this war and its immediate effects have brought the issue of Irish neutrality to the fore in public debate. The most obvious reason for this debate is the Ukraine war, however, Russian aggression in closer proximity to Ireland has also played a role in furthering this debate. In January of 2022, Russian naval ships conducted military exercises off the coast of Ireland in Irish fishing waters, while the Russian state TV broadcast a segment which simulated Ireland being wiped out by nuclear weapons. (Gallagher, 2022) Such clear transgressions on the part of Russia

have no doubt provoked discussion on the neutrality question. More recently, naval leaders of EU and Nato met in Ireland to discuss Russian maritime threats, specifically, the threat posed to subsea cables and energy infrastructure. (Gallagher, 2023)

Political parties in Ireland have tabled public forums on the issue of neutrality as the Ukraine war has heightened European sensitivities towards defending Europe and to this end, in March 2022 Europe introduced the Strategic Compass plan. (Scazzieri, 2022) However, such a plan means that Ireland must rethink its neutrality. The significance of the previously mentioned public forums cannot be underestimated or discounted in any way as they did result in both the successful referendums on abortion and gay marriage. In addition, according to the Spring Eurobarometer 72% of Irish respondents agree with the idea of a common defense and security policy among EU member states with 83% of Irish citizens viewing the EU as a place of stability in a troubled world. These numbers are similar to the EU as a whole, 77% and 69% respectively. Such numbers signal that Irish citizens have a very positive attitude towards the EU in terms of stability, a commodity which cannot be taken for granted as the world experiences geopolitical tensions on an ever increasing scale, and also in terms of collective defense as opposed to stand-alone defense. Based on these observations, the status quo of Irish neutrality cannot be assumed to remain as is.

Discussion

In 2014, Russia unilaterally annexed Crimea, and the West did not impose sanctions of any real consequence. In fact, it was only after the shooting down of MH17, the Malaysian civilian aircraft, that some western countries imposed sanctions. It could perhaps be construed that the EU, while condemning the act, failed to recognize the significance of this incursion into another sovereign state. In hindsight, this action can be seen for what it was, a prelude to the Ukraine War. The EU, right until the last minute, did not think this war could happen and was subsequently unprepared for the outcome. 75 years since the last war on European soil had created a sense that globalization was supporting peace and prosperity around the world, however, this mantra perhaps created a sense of complacency-a complacency that dialogue and diplomacy would serve

better than aggression and warfare. The political landscape in Ireland is perhaps forever changed due to the consequences of this war on the European doorstep. Over 100,000 refugees from the Ukraine war have placed enormous strain on Irish society. The already present housing crisis, coupled with the homeless pandemic and the strains on everyday social services has led to protests and demonstrations in towns and cities around Ireland. While many of these protests are by concerned citizens, who rightly feel they have a democratic right to protest and question the political decisions made for their towns and areas without consultation, there is also a far-right element to these protests and demonstrations. Social media and disinformation have fuelled anti-immigrant sentiment which may play into greater support for far-right candidates in the next general election, an election which is scheduled for later this year.

The Irish general elections of 2011 and 2016 highlighted the dissatisfaction and distrust in which the political parties and politicians were viewed by the electorate, in fact, data from both of these elections 'showed sharp increases in electoral volatility'. (Reidy & Suiter, p.121) However, despite favorable conditions existing for the rise in populist attitudes, there were no real gains made by the far-right parties. In fact, in the 2020 general election "the best far-right candidate won just 2% of first preference votes". (McDermott, 2023) Without any clear policies and quick solutions being presented by the present government to the problems that are bringing people into the streets, the far-right may well draw support from a greater percentage of the electorate. As a country which had little or no far-right presence until recent years, the political landscape may forever be changed due to the consequences of the Ukraine War. The Ukraine War may well be remembered as the point when far-right parties gained a foothold in Irish politics. A general election is scheduled by March 2025, but there is much speculation that the general election will be in November of 2024. A recent newspaper report (Howlin, 2023) raised the issue of Sinn Fein losing supporters to the far-right citing the fact that the election will now be fought on key issues such as law, order and immigration. Another consequence of the Ukraine war is the national debate surrounding Irish neutrality. Irish neutrality has long meant that Irish troops participated in UN peace-keeping efforts around the globe in areas of conflict. Irish troops have been involved in peacekeeping efforts across Europe, Africa Asia and the Middle East. (Tonra, 2012) However, as

a member of the European Union, Ireland is obligated to contribute to the security of the bloc also. Until now, the specter of war or conflict within the European Union has never been seriously considered, perhaps due to the aforementioned complacency and the misguided notion that globalization and prosperity trump geopolitical interests, however, the Ukraine war has firmly debunked this train of thought. Hence, the establishment of the European Strategic Compass. A plan which seeks to enhance European defense and security and while this has been welcomed in broad terms one of the key elements within the plan seems to be consensus among member states-an issue which could be deemed the EU's greatest strength and paradoxically it's greatest weakness. (Scazzieri, 2022) With the invasion of a new applicant country under way, the obligations of group members have become startlingly clear- an attack on one is an attack on all. The European Union soft power approach to its relations with the globe is perhaps no longer sustainable or, indeed, possible. It has become clear that when dialogue and diplomacy cannot deter conflict, then being able and willing to defend borders is crucial. The question now being asked of Irish neutrality is whether Ireland can retain it's neutrality or will the parameters of Irish neutrality need to be amended.

Conclusion

The Ukraine war is taking place on the Eastern European border, however, it's ramifications are being felt right across Europe and in particular in the most western European border country of Ireland. The EU temporary directive has compelled European nations to take in millions of refugees from Ukraine. Ireland has done so and is continuing to do so. However, the strains upon the country have now become evident; preexistent social problems concerning housing and accommodation have been inflamed, protests and demonstrations against planned refugee centers have become regular occurrences, Irish neutrality is now under discussion and the prospect of populist far-right parties playing a larger political role in the Irish political scene does not seem as unlikely as it once did. The fact that the country recovered from the 2008 financial crisis - the blame for which was placed upon the political classes-did not deter voters in 2011 and 2016 from voting for change among the main political parties. Voters caused political parties to abandon ideology in favor of practical goals. Yet, the Economic Recovery from 2016 onwards has done little to

disperse widespread distrust of the political classes. This, coupled with the Ukraine war and its tragic consequences have exacerbated social issues within the country and this may ultimately bring further disruption to the political world in Ireland, namely the advancement of the far-right agenda. Whatever the outcome of the Ukraine war, the impact of this war will continue to reverberate far from the battlefields in Eastern Europe for a long time to come.

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