
European Studies

Trends in the Evolution of the Party System in Spain in the Post-Franco Period

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Abstract—The degradation of the bipolar party system established in Spain in the post-Franco period, based on the dominance in the political space of two system-forming parties of opposite political orientation, and its replacement with a multi-party model with a wider involvement of new alternative players in political processes seems to be a long-term trend. Taking into account the extreme problematic nature of the formation of mono-party cabinets of ministers in the future, the creation of government coalitions becomes inevitable. However, due to the absence of a “coalition culture,” which was not necessary before, as well as a noticeable polarization of political forces and the growth of mutual rejection at the level of leaders and party elites, the solution of this problem in modern Spanish realities threatens to turn into an endless political marathon and is fraught with significant increased political instability in the coming years.

Keywords: Spain, transition, Francoism, PSOE, People’s Party, UDC, Unidas Podemos, parliamentary elections, coalition culture, nationalists, polarization of political forces, Europe, Germany

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In the second half of the twentieth century, in the leading Western European countries, party systems that were generally similar in form and content were formed. They were based on the alternation in power of the two main parties of a competing political and even ideological orientation—as a rule, conservatives and social democrats with an auxiliary role, and in some cases, smaller parties capable of performing the function of allies or situational fellow travelers. At the same time, the stability of such a system was ensured due to the high total percentage of votes received in the elections by the two leading parties (70–90%). However, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, this model began to collapse due, on the one hand, to the crisis of the old, established parties, and on the other hand, the emergence of alternative formations on the political stage, capable of winning over a significant percentage of the electorate. A similar trend is also characteristic of Spain, where the bipolar party system that emerged in the post-Franco period is being seriously tested.

THE FORMATION OF A BIPOLAR PARTY MODEL IN SPAIN

As a result of the dismantling of Francoism, a democratic political system was created in Spain, “stable in

its assessments and moderate in its conflicts, which fit within the framework of the normal confrontation of interests and ideologies,” according to the conclusion of a team of analysts close to the Spanish government during the time of Socialist Prime Minister Felipe González (Alonso Zaldívar y Castells, 1992, p. 31). Political parties have become an integral element of this system, which, as stated in the current Spanish constitution (Article 6), “express political pluralism, contribute to the formation and manifestation of [the] popular will and are the main instrument of political participation.”

The democratic surge at the dawn of post-Francoism led to the formation of more than 500 different organizations that were included in the register of political associations. However, the vast majority of them soon “dispersed in the face of the strength and electoral appeal of large parties and coalitions” (Alonso Zaldívar y Castells, 1992, p. 32), which formed the base of the modern Spanish party system. Only a few parties were able to prove their viability, both the historical parties that emerged before the civil war of 1936–1939 and the new ones that managed to fit into the democratic landscape.

The historical parties include the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), which was formed in the 19th century (1879) and the Communist Party of Spain (CPS), which celebrated its centenary in November 2021, as well as two nationalist parties, the Basque Nationalist Party (BNP) and the PSOE created in

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1895, and the Republican Left of Catalonia (RLC), which was created in 1931 as a result of the growth of antimonarchist sentiments in Spain and the left-leaning part of the supporters of Catalan nationalism.

These political parties participated in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republican government (the PSOE and the CPS were its main support), and after the establishment of the Francoist order in the country, they were forced to go underground. Interestingly, the defeat of the Republicans in the war largely contributed to the survival of the parties of the left and nationalist orientation, motivating their desire to resist (albeit, with varying degrees of activity) the new authoritarian government.

As for the right-wing and centrist parties that existed in Spain before the civil war, they all disappeared from the country's party map, actually becoming part of the new Francoist political system, the core element of which was the National Movement (NM), which united all the Caudillo supporters in its ranks. Nevertheless, the NM has never been a fully cohesive organization, it has always suffered from an internal struggle between various factions wanting to become closer to its leader. Initially, the leading positions in the NM were occupied by members of the Spanish phalanx, which was a Spanish version of world fascism. However, over the years, the influence of pro-fascist radicals in the NM declined, and in the late period of Francoism, young technocrats associated with the Catholic organization Opus Dei came to the fore. The contradictions that existed in the NM prevented the idea of Francoism gradually growing into a limited democratic society through a strategy of openness, which involved the creation of various political associations in the NM that could form the base of the new political system of Spain after Franco (*Modern Spain*, 1983, pp. 6–23).

As a result, the formation of parties in the center and on the right flank of the political space of post-Franco Spain took place largely spontaneously. Until the first democratic elections were held in 1977, it was not clear which currents from the former Francoist camp would take the lead. In particular, at a certain stage it was believed that the Spanish Christian Democrats, whose foreign adherents occupied strong positions in a number of Western European countries, primarily in Germany and Italy, had good chances to become the center of attraction for all the rightists.

For Spain, throughout its centuries-old history, a significant influence of the personality factor on political processes is characteristic. In this sense, Spain is very close to Russia. Strong leaders at the head of the state contributed to its prosperity, strengthening the position of Madrid in the international arena, while weak leaders led the country to a dead end, undermining the efforts of their politically more capable predecessors. The relatively painless political transition from Francoism to a democratic system in Spain

was accomplished (perhaps decisively) thanks to the courageous and effective leadership of Adolfo Suárez, who is without a doubt an iconic figure in modern Spanish history. The enormous authority that Suárez, who took over as Prime Minister of Spain in July 1976, won in Spanish society during the transition period, allowed him to quickly form an election coalition, the Union of the Democratic Center (UDC), which united 15 groups of various centrist orientations in its ranks, ranging from the Social Democrats to the “civilized,” moderate Francoists.

Suarez himself was from the National Movement. Moreover, before his appointment as head of government, he served as the Party Secretary of the NM. Against the backdrop of the stale veterans of the “crusade” against communism, Suarez and his political associates, who belonged to the last Francoist generation (they were 40 to 50 years old), appeared clearly preferable: they were in the prime of life, had a certain political experience, and could offer a meaningful reform program.

The other post-Franco parties that were not included in the UDC and little known to the electorate had to literally prepare their election programs at short notice. As they did not have grassroots organizations, they had to rely on the recognizability of their leaders, who were also associated with the former regime, but whose political reputation was ambiguous and often simply unsuitable for the new political realities.

There was no such confusion in the camp of the left. However, a complete picture of the electorate's priorities was also lacking. The PSOE and the CPS held the advantage. The socialists had, first of all, a young dynamic leadership headed by the 35-year-old Party Secretary Felipe Gonzalez, who managed to win a tense intraparty struggle and remove from power the old émigré government, which had lost sight of the new Spanish realities. For the communists, the years of leadership in the underground struggle against Francoism allowed the party to win sympathy and support among the workers and the intellectuals in Spanish society. However, the old guard remained at the helm in the CPS, which in the eyes of many Spaniards was associated with the civil war period, whose consequences had to be overcome as quickly as possible.

The first democratic elections in post-Franco Spain took place on June 15, 1977, six months after a national referendum on a political reform bill was held. The bill stipulated the creation of a bicameral parliament, consisting of the Congress of Deputies (lower house, 350 seats) and the Senate (chamber of territorial representation, 207 seats), elected by universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage.

The UDC won the election with 34.7% of the vote. They were closely followed by the PSOE, for which 29.2% of the Spaniards who took part in the voting cast their votes. The Communists were third with 9.2%

of the vote. They were followed by the right-wing People's Alliance (8.3%), which became the refuge of many neo-Franco conservatives who realized the irreversibility of the changes that had taken place in the country, but were not ready to support Suarez as they considered him to be excessively left-wing. The Christian Democratic Federation won just 1.4% of the vote, which was the end of this political project. The followers of the Francoist "bunker" (the most staunch adherents of the caudillo) disappeared from the political arena altogether as relics of a bygone era (*Modern Spain*, 1983, p. 31).

In general, the nationalist parties of the Basque Country and Catalonia, which were able to compete on an equal footing with the regional branches of the all-Spanish parties, successfully passed through the crucible of the first post-Franco elections. This meant that, despite 40 years of persecution during the period of Francoism, nationalism had returned, and its support was generally at the same level as in the 1930s, which confirmed the stable nature of the nationalist preferences that existed among in parts of the Catalan and Basque societies (Orlov, 2020, p. 401).

The contours of the party-political system, which existed with minor transformations until the mid-2010s, were actually formed following the results of the 1977 elections in Spain. It was based on a two-party model (in Spain this model is called *bi-partism*) with the auxiliary role of two or three relatively small parties (including nationalist ones), which could, if necessary, add votes to the winning party in parliament, but did not participate in the formation of the government. After the crisis and then the collapse of the UDC in 1981–1982, associated, in particular, with the struggle for leadership in this coalition (later to become a party) and the expulsion of the founder of the UDC Adolfo Suarez, the position of the centrists as one of the two backbone parties was occupied by the People's Alliance, which was later transformed into the People's Party (PP).

The post-Franco two-party model was not something fundamentally new for Spain. In one form or another, a similar model existed throughout most of the 19th century, acquiring canonical forms at its end, when, by mutual agreement, there was a peaceful alternation in the power of the conservatives of Canovas and the liberals of Sagasta, which made it possible to moderate the political ambitions of their main competitors, the Carlists and the Republicans (Gallego Castañera, 1988, p. 112). I would like to add that in my opinion, the blurring of the two-party model during the period of the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1939) became one of the causes of the civil war: in the fateful elections of 1936, two leading parties, the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right (CEDA) and the PSOE, representing opposing political tendencies, failed to bring together the strategic minimum of 51% of the vote, and were "destroyed" in

the ensuing "total confrontation" (Gallego Castañera, 1988, p. 116).

In the early years of modern Spanish democracy, the disappearance of the UDC from the political arena became an incentive for the leaders of the People's Alliance to abandon excessively conservative positions in order to keep most of the former centrist electorate in their orbit. This was generally successfully accomplished. Only a small percentage of the members of the UDC, who belonged to its social democratic wing, subsequently joined the PSOE. In turn, the socialists also consolidated the entire left and center-left electorate under their wing. The main victims as a result of this tactic were the communists, who gradually lost their positions as a significant element of the Spanish political reality and disappeared into the United Left coalition (Astakhov and Rostov, 2020, p. 116).

To confirm the thesis about the dominance in the political life of Spain for nearly 40 years of two major parties competing with each other, we have given below the statistics of the cumulative results of these parties in the parliamentary elections held in 1977–2011.

In the first 11 elections in Spain in the post-Franco period, the combined electoral support of the two main, competing parties of opposing political orientations ranged from 63.76% (the lowest figure in 1977) to 83.81% (the highest figure in 2008). This provided these parties with sustained support in the lower house of parliament, ranging from a combined 282 seats in 1989 (80.6% of the total number of seats) to 323 seats in 2008 (92.3% of the total number of seats).

The performance of other political parties and pre-election coalitions against the backdrop of the dominance of the two main parties looked insignificant. If we take the combined figures of the third and fourth parties, they ranged from 6.8% (in 2008, the lowest figure) to 17.54% (in 1977, the highest figure). Accordingly, the representation of these parties in the Congress of Deputies was also very conditional (minimum, 16 deputies after the elections in 2008; maximum, 37 deputies in 1986 and 1996).

At the same time, the two-party system ensured a fairly high level of political stability. The party that won the election (in our analysis, the first party) received, as a rule, an absolute majority in the lower house of parliament, or easily gained the votes necessary to form a stable government through the support of deputies from small parties. During this period, the Spanish government was formed 6 times under the PSOE, thrice under the People's Party, and twice under the UDC. This arrangement made the creation of parliamentary coalitions unnecessary. As a result, post-Franco Spain did not develop the negotiation culture required to reach inter-party compromises, which became especially noticeable when the two-party system, unexpectedly for many local politicians and analysts, splintered.

Table 1

Election date	The total number of votes cast for the two main parties, ranked first and second, in the elections	The total number of mandates of the two main parties, ranked first and second, in the Congress of Deputies following the election results (out of a total of 350 seats)
06/15/1977 (1st election)	63.76% (UDC + PSOE)	283 (80.9%)
03/01/1979 (2nd election)	65.24% (UDC + PSOE)	289 (82.6%)
10/28/1982 (3rd election)	74.47% (PSOE + PA)	309 (88.3%)
06/22/1986 (4th election)	70.03% (PSOE + PC)	289 (82.6%)
10/29/1989 (5th election)	65.39% (PSOE + PP)	282 (80.6%)
06/06/1993 (6th election)	73.54% (PSOE + PP)	300 (85.7%)
03/03/1996 (7th election)	76.42% (NP + PSOE)	297 (84.9%)
03/12/2000 (8th election)	78.68% (PP + PSOE)	308 (88%)
03/14/2004 (9th election)	80.3% (PSOE + PP)	312 (89.1%)
03/09/2008 (10th election)	83.81% (PSOE + PP)	323 (92.3%)
11/20/2011 (11th election)	73.39% (PP + PSOE)	296 (84.6%)

Note: PC is the People's Coalition formed around the People's Alliance (PA).

Source: the tables and other calculations given in this article were compiled by the author based on official documents.

MULTIPARTY SYSTEM AS A NEW POLITICAL REALITY IN SPAIN

The 12th parliamentary election, held on December 20, 2015, became a milestone. As a result of the election, fairly representative factions of two young parties were formed in the Congress of Deputies: the centrist Ciudadanos (Citizens) and the left Podemos (We Can), consisting of 40 and 42 deputies, respectively. These parties garnered 13.94% and 12.67% of the vote, with Podemos actually holding 20.68% of the vote when the votes of the regional coalitions formed around this party were added to the nationwide list. In this case, the number of the Podemos faction in the lower house increased to 69 deputies.

At the same time, the indicators of the two leading parties dropped sharply. The People's Party was supported by 28.71% of the voters in the elections (15.92% less than in the 2011 election), which allowed the populists to get only 123 deputies in the lower house of parliament (against 186 in the previous composition of the Congress of Deputies). The results of the socialists were generally perceived by their supporters to be catastrophic: 22.01% (6.75% less than the extremely unsuccessful election results for the party in 2011). The PSOE parliamentary faction in the Congress of Deputies was severely reduced to 90 deputies (that is, less than the psychologically significant milestone of 100 seats, below which the socialists had never fallen in the modern history of Spain) (Paniagua Fuentes, 2016; Orlov, 2017).

This trend continued in all subsequent parliamentary elections. The summary table below (Table 2) of the results of the elections in 2015, 2016, and twice during 2019 indicates the emergence in Spain of new political realities associated with the erosion of the two-party system and the formation of a multiparty system.

In the 2019 elections, another party broke into the political space of Spain, the far-right Vox (Voice), which the leftist and liberal analysts characterize as the heir to the Francoist ideology, whose followers were unable to create a strong party in the period of democratic transition and for four decades "melted" into the ranks of the People's Party as its radical conservative wing (Arroyo Menéndez, 2020).

As can be seen from Table 2, the leading two parties in the last four parliamentary elections jointly won about 50% of the votes (the best result was 55.64% in 2016 and the worst one was 45.36% in the elections in April 2019). This is significantly lower than before, when their total support in some cases exceeded 80%. Accordingly, the representation of these parties in the Congress of Deputies has significantly decreased: from more than 80% of votes (and even 92.3% in 2008) to 50–60% in recent years (the best figure is 63.4% after the 2016 elections) and the worst figure is 54% in April 2019).

According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (CIS) in January 2022, 28.5% of voters were ready to vote for the PSOE in the new parliamentary elections, and

Table 2

Election date	The total number of votes cast for the two main parties, ranked first and second, in the election	The total number of mandates of the two main parties, ranked first and second, in the Congress of Deputies following the election results (out of a total of 350 seats)
12/20/2015 (12th election)	50.72% (PP + PSOE)	213 (60.9%)
06/26/2016 (13th election)	55.64% (PP + PSOE)	222 (63.4%)
04/28/2019 (14th election)	45.36% (PSOE + PP)	189 (54%)
10/10/2019 (15th election)	48.82% (PSOE + PP)	209 (59.7%)

Source: the tables and other calculations given in this article were compiled by the author based on official documents.

21.5%, for the People's Party, which in total would allow the leading two parties to receive 50% of the vote. Such a potential outcome of the elections fully fits into the new Spanish electoral paradigm¹ (Sánchez Muñoz, 2017)].

The significant changes that have taken place in the Spanish party system (Anikeeva, 2019; Khenkin, 2020) are largely due to objective problems and difficulties that the country has faced in the 21st century. The Podemos party was formed in March 2014 in the wake of the protest movement following the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, which deeply affected Spanish society. Part of the left-wing electorate, dissatisfied with the conciliatory policies of the PSOE, having gone through a short phase of social movements, actively supported Podemos, seeing the new party as a conductor of their aspirations (Tammes, 2015). The leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, a professor at the Complutense University, was seen as a classical left-wing leader, who combined the qualities of a theoretician, orator, and leader of the masses (Khenkin, 2019). In relation to this, it must be emphasized that objectively the left-wing cluster of the Spanish political space has remained partly free throughout the post-Franco transition. The CPS, and later the United Left, could not fill it completely for various reasons, as a result of which part of the left-wing electorate voted for the PSOE, which had recovered over the years of democracy more by inertia than through strong conviction. This circumstance created a favorable opportunity for Podemos to further strengthen its position, provided that it was able to build its political line correctly, without drifting or unjustified bias (Garzón, 2014).

The Ciudadanos party was formed before the Podemos, in 2006 in Barcelona as a regional organization. It was formed as a result of the desire of a part of the Catalan society to actively oppose the local nation-

alism that was gaining strength. Initially, the party identified itself as a center-left, social-democratic organization, but later it began to turn to the right. As the national ambitions of Ciudadanos grew, Spanish analysts coined the term "partido-bisagra" or "hinge party" for them. It was assumed that given the new political realities, Ciudadanos would play the role of a junior partner in coalitions with the PP or PSOE, which would ensure the stability of the cabinet. However, the obviously overestimated political ambitions of the founder and leader of the party, Albert Rivera, and the obvious mistakes he made harmed the Ciudadanos at a certain stage. The party lost the lion's share of its electorate, which for the most part went over to the People's Party.

The emergence of the Vox party on the political horizon of Spain has both domestic and international implications. For a long time it was believed that the far-right political project in Spain had no prospects. The failures of Vox in the elections in 2015 and 2016 (electoral support of 0.23 and 0.20% of the vote, respectively) appeared to have convincingly confirmed this thesis. However, everything changed dramatically in 2018, when the party unexpectedly entered the autonomous parliament of the traditionally left-wing Andalusia, and then repeated its success in two national elections held during 2019. Like the mythical Phoenix bird, Spanish (Castilian) nationalism was revived before our very eyes as the antipode of Catalan and Basque regional nationalism, having not explicitly manifested itself in the post-Franco period, except perhaps in the form of local and marginal relapses.

The rise of the Vox led to an increase in the polarization of Spanish society. Thus, for all right-wing supporters, Podemos and the United Left are simply communists, while for all left-wing supporters, Vox, and often followers of the People's Party, are fascists. This gives grounds to assert that the civil war in the souls and hearts of many Spaniards, including the young, is continuing, despite the well-established idea of the post-Franco transition being seen as a miracu-

¹ PSOE and PP suben más de medio punto en el primer barómetro del CIS de 2022. https://cadenaser.com/ser/2022/01/20/politica/1642674552_960834.html.

lous reconciliation of Spanish society by the scientific and political community. At the same time, it would be wrong to fully classify Vox as a neo-Franc party, although certain elements of the old school caudillo are undoubtedly present in the ideology of this party. Vox followers are supporters of the traditional foundations of patriarchal, conservative, Catholic Spain, who completely reject all the newfangled attitudes of the European and American left, primarily the aggressive imposition on society of the values of gay people as a symbol of a new model of liberal democracy. In addition to this, illegal migration, which directly affects Spain, which has become a transshipment route and the recipient of thousands of immigrants from Africa and parts of Asia, is a serious irritant for the Vox and other Spanish rightists. In these ways, Vox has many features in common with the new European right, which is firmly establishing itself on the political field of a number of large countries of the Old World.

After the November 2019 parliamentary elections, for the first time in post-Franco history, a government coalition consisting of the PSOE and Unidas Podemos (UP) was created, which the entire progressive Spain actively supported, including world-renowned intellectuals and cultural figures, many of whom traditionally stand on the left (Vernikov, 2019a; 2019b). However, the leader of the PSOE, Pedro Sanchez, tried to avoid forming this coalition and only entered into a coalition with the UP as he felt he would otherwise lose power.

In the voting in the Congress of Deputies, the candidacy of Pedro Sanchez for the post of head of the government of Spain received the minimal support from the deputies: 167 votes in favor, with 165 against him, and 18 abstentions. In addition to the PSOE and UP, deputies from most of the small left and nationalist parties voted for Sanchez (or at least did not block his candidacy), united mainly by the desire to prevent the return of the right to power, rather than the desire to align themselves with the ruling coalition. Thus, a situation close to a stalemate has arisen, when Sanchez, in order to preserve his cabinet, is forced to constantly maneuver (Kurakina-Damir, 2020), and at the same time make sure not to disturb the Catalan and Basque nationalists, whom the Vox leaders (and the populists) openly call “enemies of Spain.”

The extreme instability of the Sanchez cabinet was confirmed by the vote in the Congress of Deputies in early March 2022 on the reform of labor legislation, which was tentatively approved by the business community, trade unions, and other “social agents.” The reform was supported by 175 deputies, and, this time, the Ciudadanos party, usually opposed to the government, supported Sanchez, and the 174 members of parliament who voted against him, in addition to representatives of the People’s Party and Vox, included deputies from the RLC, BNP, and other small left-wing nationalist parties whom the prime

minister constantly appeases and whose support the government needs to remain in power².

It should also be emphasized that the crisis of bipartisanship manifested itself prominently during the pandemic, when the interparty confrontation in Spain may have reached its climax (Yakovlev, 2020; Vernikov, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

The change in political preferences of a significant part of Spanish society, which has led to a sharp reduction in support for the two leading parties, the PSOE and the PP, is a long-term trend. The former consolidation of the left-wing and right-wing electorate around these two parties is significantly blurred: today, together, they are able to collect at best 50% of the vote against the previous 80% or more. The votes they lost went to new parties that are eager to establish their place in the Spanish political arena.

The creation of governmental coalitions in Spain under these conditions has become inevitable. At the same time, the solution to this problem, due to the lack of a “coalition culture” and the traditionally inflated ambitions of all participants in Spanish politics, seems to be extremely difficult, and in some cases simply hopeless.

In a situation of a political tug-of-war, which, apparently, is becoming the norm in Spain, it cannot be ruled out that in the foreseeable future the leading parties of this country (PSOE and PP) will be doomed to take the unprecedented step of forming a grand coalition, following the example of Germany during the time of Chancellor Angela Merkel. As of today, this seems unrealistic, and simply unthinkable to some in Spain, but if the early election charade that marked the 2016–2019 period continues in one form or another, and the government continues to be forced, like a tightrope walker, to constantly search an elusive balance, then, perhaps, there will simply be no other reasonable choice for responsible politicians in this country (Orlov, 2021).

The implementation of this scenario, however, will be significantly hampered by the sharply increased polarization of political forces in Spain in recent years, which is expressed not only in the discrepancy between the program guidelines of competing parties but also in the mutual rejection of these parties at the level of leaders and elites. Extremely harsh criticism of each other, sometimes taking the form of direct insults and unwillingness to listen to their opponent, will create additional difficulties of a purely subjective nature, shattering the entire political system. There is an obvi-

² El congreso aprueba la votaci de la reforma laboral. <https://www.msn.com/es-es/noticias/elecciones/el-congreso-aprueba-la-votaci-c3-b3n-de-la-reforma-laboral-c2-bfqu-c3-a9-partidos-votaron-a-favor-y-cu-c3-alles-en-contra/ar-AATrt9H?ocid=uxbndlbing>. Cited December 19, 2021.

ous analogy here with the situation in the United States, where certain circles in the Democratic and Republican parties today perceive each other not just as competitors, but as enemies. This is a very disturbing phenomenon of the new Spanish realities, capable of pushing competing party elites to act in a destructive way. In general terms, there is a growing “variability of the future” of both Spain and the “united” Europe as a whole (Gromyko, 2021, p. 11), behind which there may be an uncertainty of the processes that will dominate in the European space and individual countries, including Spain, in the near future.

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