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Freedom of what? A content analysis of European Commission speeches on the conceptualization of the European value of freedom

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Freedom of what? A content analysis of European Commission speeches on the
conceptualization of the European value of freedom

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Challenges to Democracy and the Rule of Law in European Politics

Dr. Tom Theuns

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Introduction

Consensus is often difficult to reach, especially in the realms of power and politics. However, one topic on which many actors find themselves in agreement is that the fundamental values of the European Union are under threat. Academics have written extensively about these threats, chief among them the erosion of the European values in several European member states. Numerous articles exist on this democratic backsliding, from case studies on Polish NGO's (Pospieszna & Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022) to the sanctioning of far-right parties in Austria (Sadurski, 2010) and the rhetoric of Viktor Orbán (Mos, 2020). Special attention is often given to Article 7 TEU, and not without reason. After all, it is this Article that is supposed to allow the European Union to defend itself against internal erosion of its values. However, so far, Art. 7 has proven to be insufficient: the EU has never managed to put Art. 7-based sanctions of any kind into effect, while its function as a deterrent has also not prevented member states such as Hungary from further backsliding. It is therefore not surprising that no small amount of academic attention has been invested in uncovering potential shortfalls of Art. 7.

In this paper, I shall attempt to add to this literature. However, as opposed to previous literature regarding Art. 7 as the main stumbling block, I will instead focus on the European Values as described in Art. 2 TEU themselves. In particular, I will discuss various conceptualizations of the European value of Freedom. After this, I will use these conceptualizations to perform a content analysis on public speeches given by the Von der Leyen Commission to discover which of these conceptualizations is dominant within the European Commission, the 'Guardian of the Treaties'. Such an understanding may contribute to the research by clarifying how the Commission interprets the European Values and by extension the erosion of said values. Such knowledge could help explain why measures protecting the European values, such as Art. 7, have thus far proven to be ineffective.

Conceptual Framework

In this paper, I will make use of three different theoretical frameworks. These frameworks provide the necessary tools to create a suitable typology for my coding frame, as well as a theoretical justification for the practical significance of the European values and the suitability of performing a content analysis to research the interpretation of European values.

Value conceptualization

Firstly, building on Rawls' (1971, p. 5) theory of Justice, Kei Hiruta (2021, pp. 51-52) utilizes a simple theoretical framework to distinguish between ideas (which I call values in this paper),

concepts, and conceptualizations. In his system, concepts constitute the basic ‘building blocks of thought’. These blocks can be viewed or interpreted from different angles, giving way to different conceptualizations of the same block. For instance, the concept of distributive justice can be conceptualized in many ways, such as welfare-based and desert-based distributive justice. Several concepts can also be combined to form – or build – an overarching value (in this case, the idea of justice). Although this conceptual framework is largely a heuristic device focused on allowing increasing levels of abstraction to exist side by side, it does provide an excellent method of categorizing different, often overlapping, concepts while recognizing the countless different conceptualizations that underlie one, or multiple, concepts. As such, this theory will form the basis of my typology of freedom.

The power of Ideas

The second theoretical framework utilized in this paper concerns the influence that different conceptualizations of values can have on decision-makers and public opinion. This influence is often indirect, hard to measure, and can change over time. Indeed, it is not without reason that Chong & Druckman (2007, p. 103) were pessimistic about the existence of high-quality public opinions, which they defined as “stable, consistent, informed, and connected to abstract principles and values”.

However, whereas the influence of values might have little direct and lasting effect on public opinion, this does not mean that values are irrelevant. Decision-makers and other political elites, as well as activists or the media, also engage in the formation of personal opinions. Much like high-quality public opinions, opinions of these political elite are also built upon concrete information as well as abstract principles and values. This elite subsequently engages in a discourse among elites which only intermittently makes contact with the wider public discourse (Zaller, 1992, pp. 6-9). For instance, Zaller argues that the rebuttal of racist scientific research on white racial superiority in the 1930’s – a moment where new information entered the public arena – was one of the major elements in changing elite opinion and discourse in the US. Of course, public opinion would be slower to follow (Zaller, 1992, pp. 9-13). In this example, it was a change in (scientific) information that preceded a change in public opinion. However, values also play a significant role. Even within this example, reconsideration of the opinion only makes sense if the elite in question hold some regard for the values of egalitarianism or equality. Furthermore, a change in values can also occasion a change in opinion.

These elite opinions and discourses are not without consequences. In particular, there are two effects which are especially relevant for this paper. Firstly, the beliefs and opinions of a

decision-maker affect their decision-making (Redlawsk, 2021). This is perhaps an obvious statement, but it should not be taken for granted. Of course, opinions are not the only factor of importance in decision-making. Emotions, voter expectations, and external pressure groups (among others) can also be majorly influential in decision-making (Redlawsk, 2021).

Framing theory

Framing theory, the third theoretical framework, provides a second route through which values can affect political actions. In essence, framing theory posits ‘that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations’ (Chong & Druckman, 2007, pp. 104-105). The action of ‘framing’ itself consists of constructing one of these perspectives on an issue. For instance, when unemployment rises, a politician or newspaper might want to create a frame on this issue. They might, on the basis of their internal considerations, choose to highlight the economic costs for the government over a frame that centers on the plight of the unemployed. Yet another person might highlight the adverse effects on employers and businesses, whereas a fourth person might focus on worsening labour conditions. In doing so, these people do not merely form an opinion on an issue, but also highlight and delineate the bandwidth of the political discussion. If the dominant frame focusses on the economic costs for the government, appeals to increase unemployment benefits will sound illogical. However, if the dominant frame focusses on the plight of the unemployed, increasing unemployment benefits appears more appealing (Chong & Druckman, 2007, pp. 110-114).

Taken together, these three theories provide justifications and methods for analysing different interpretation of certain values. Hiratu’s method of value conceptualization shows some similarities with framing theory. Both issues and concepts can have different perspectives (or conceptualizations) which are partially mutually exclusive and highlight different aspects of the underlying issue (or concept). Halperin & Heath (2020, pp. 373-387) have posited that the social order is essentially socially constructed and that reality therefore is often experienced through the lens of a particular idea, value or discourse. As such, discourse and different conceptualizations of values can influence this social order. Furthermore, these discourses are often propagated through textual or verbal language. In much the same way as frames in framing theory can delineate the bandwidth of a political discussion, I therefore posit that different conceptualizations of a value can do so as well by shaping the social order in particular ways, highlighting certain aspects of reality above others. This argumentation is not unique,

and other authors have previously analyzed conceptions of European values using a framing analysis (Theuns, 2024, in press, pp. 43-60).

Through the two routes mentioned above, values can impact the political discussion and the considerations of decisionmakers and elites. Furthermore, concepts and conceptualizations of values can, much like frames in framing theory, be propagated through textual or verbal language. As such, a content analysis can be used to research what conceptualizations of a given value are present or prevalent within a certain group or individual.

Research design

Following the assumptions laid out in my theoretical framework, it appears that different conceptualizations of values can shape political discussions and actions. From there it follows that an actors interpretation of a given value can significantly impact their decision making. As mentioned in the introduction, one of such actors is the European Commission. In this next section, I will lay out my research design, while also substantiating my decisions to focus on the European Commission, the value of Freedom, and the use of a content analysis.

Categorizing European Values

The European values as laid out in Article 2 TEU are expansive. They include human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, and espouse “societies in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”(Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012). However, without further interpretation, these values are broad in nature. One major source of such interpretation is the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFREU) (European Union, 2010). This Charter provides further information on the values of dignity, freedom(s), equality, solidarity, citizens’ rights, and justice by listing a number of fundamental rights and democratic principles that are granted to EU citizens based on these values. Although this system already points to both the liberal and democratic concepts of freedom (more on these below), it still leaves much to be desired. Using Hiruta’s method of concept categorization, one might equate the European values in the TEU with Hiruta’s broad ideas, whereas the rights and freedoms provided in the CFREU might point to different concepts that build up those ideas (Hiruta, 2021, pp. 51-52).

However, many essential concepts remain elusive, and conceptualization is not provided by the TEU or CFREU at all. As such, external conceptualizations are needed to provide a thorough typology with which to analyse the European value of freedom. These could be made

inductively while reading the corpus. However, since political philosophy has several well established main schools of thought, I have decided to establish, using Hiruta's Value conceptualization, a typology and coding scheme beforehand (more on these below) (Hiruta, 2021, pp. 51-52)

The decision to specifically analyse the European value of freedom has several reasons. Firstly, the value of freedom – along with democracy, which has been analyzed by Theuns (2024, in press), and the Rule of law – is one of the values that can be said to be impeded by democratically eroding member states. Although transgressions of European values often harm multiple values simultaneously – discrimination against a minority group could already impede on values of freedom, human dignity, equality, non-discrimination, and pluralism (among others) – it does mean that a content analysis of the value of freedom could efficiently contribute to the literature on democratic backsliding in Europe. Secondly, the idea of freedom, with its different concepts and conceptualizations, fits neatly into Hiruta's method of concept categorization and is thus perfectly suited for a content analysis utilizing this method. Lastly, there are practical concerns that prohibit a content analysis of all, or even multiple, European values. Such an analysis would go far beyond the scope of this paper. It would either demand a much more superficial analysis of each individual value, or risk becoming too expansive to focus on answering a concrete research question. Furthermore, even the most superficial of such an analysis would require an extensive analysis of many different diverging ideas within political philosophy, which would be best served by different modes of analysis instead of being squeezed within one overarching research method. As such, I will limit my research to the value of Freedom.

The role of the Commission

My choice to focus on the Commission, instead of, for instance, the European Council or the European Parliament is simpler: The Commission, as the 'guardian of the treaties', has an important and potentially decisive role to play when combatting the regression of European values described in Article 2 TEU. Furthermore, the Commission is also uniquely well-suited to have its public discourse analyzed. Previous research has shown the central role that discourse plays in constructing meaning and legitimizing certain behaviour on the European level (De Ville & Orbie, 2014) & (Theuns, 2024, in press). This is in contrast to other institutions. For instance, European Council meetings are often secretive, without much public discourse to be analyzed, apart from statements from individual European Council members, often in their native language. The European Parliament, on the other hand, has been

exceptionally vocal about democratic backsliding, adopting a resolution urging the use of Art. 7 in 2018. Such a large body, which has been as vocal as it is, simply produces too much discourse for me to analyse. Furthermore, due to the ideological diversity in the Parliament, its discourse on European values is unlikely to produce one coherent concept of freedom. Of course, the Commission also contains ideological diversity, but it is expected to form a common position in public, as opposed to members of the European Parliament. As such, my research question is the following:

How does the European Commission interpret the value of freedom as enshrined in Article 2 TEU?

Content Analysis

To discover how the European Commission interprets the value of freedom, I will make use of the aforementioned content analysis in an attempt to find empirical evidence of which conceptualizations are dominant in discourse emanating from the Commission. To achieve this, I shall first develop a categorization of different concepts and conceptualizations of freedom. After this, I will collect and code all speeches made by the Von der Leyen Commission containing either the keywords ‘freedom’, ‘freedoms’, ‘liberty’ or ‘liberties’. This leaves 476 speeches between the 1st of December 2019, the date the Von der Leyen Commission took office, and the 31st of January 2024, the most recent date that could reliably be coded at the time of writing. Since a speech can contain multiple instances of these keywords which each corresponds to a different categorization, every instance of these 1024 keywords shall be coded individually. The choice to include only the Von Der Leyen Commission is twofold. First of all, Halperin & Heath posit that over time, discourse and ideas can change (2020, pp. 365-390). Such processes can be exacerbated by changes in institutional structures or by including new actors and circumstances. Although severe changes in institutional structures did not occur between the Von Der Leyen Commission compared to the Commission of her predecessor, portfolios were shuffled and Commissioners replaced. As this content analysis is not well-equipped to detect changes over time, it cannot account for possible changes in the discourse over time, or between different Commissions. Secondly, the 476 speeches, which include 1024 mentions of ‘freedom’, ‘freedoms’, ‘liberty’ or ‘liberties’, are sufficient to create an expansive data set on which meaningful quantitative analysis can be performed.

Typologies of Freedom/Liberty

Before I can start my content analysis, a proper categorization of freedom is needed. This can be challenging, as freedom has been a subject of deliberation going as far back as ancient Greece, over 2,000 years ago (De Dijn, 2020, pp. 1-3). Furthermore, over this period, the language used to talk about freedom has changed significantly. Indeed, it would be perfectly justifiable historically to add a conceptualization of freedom as the opposite of slavery, or the absence of a (tyrannical) monarch (Skinner, 1998, pp. 20-24). However, even if such conceptualizations would turn out to exist among the Commission, it is unlikely that similar historical language would be used. It seems unlikely that Commissioner speeches, which are usually given for political purposes, would include comments on the finer conceptualizations of philosophical subjects. As such, a balance needs to be struck between a sufficiently granular approach to categorization, while at the same time acknowledging the reality that most uses of the keywords freedom(s) and/or liberty(ies) in speeches will lack a precise conceptualization of freedom. As such, I will make use of Hiruta's categorization system which adds granularity wherever possible, but doesn't obstruct categorization where this granularity is absent. To achieve this, the categorization shall include definitions of freedom at both the conceptual, as well as the 'conceptualizational' level. Below, an overview of the different concepts and conceptualizations used can be found. This is not an exhaustive analysis of these concepts or conceptualizations, nor does it need to be. It merely seeks to succinctly summarize key aspects and distinctions of each category on which basis a discourse analysis can be performed. Some final attention needs to be paid to the difference between 'freedom' and 'liberty'. Although it is true that certain writers and philosophers have tried to distinguish between the two, this distinction has often been inconsistent or frivolous (Hiruta, 2021, pp. 50-51). As such, applying a distinction between liberty and freedom in this paper when no definitive distinction exists elsewhere would be both arbitrary and unhelpful. As such, this categorization will use these terms interchangeably.

Democratic Freedom

Democratic Freedom is perhaps the oldest concept of freedom, going back as far as ancient Greece (De Dijn, 2020, pp. 15-34). In its essence, it posits that one can only be free when one has the opportunity to influence how one is governed. Thus, at the center of this belief lies the idea that one can only be free in a democracy. Throughout history, multiple conceptualizations of this democratic freedom have been developed. One of these, being strongly intertwined with the republican conception of freedom, posits that anyone who is not free to make their own

laws, is dominated by another and therefore not free (Skinner, 1998, pp. 69-72). Other authors have come to the same conclusion through different means. Most famously in recent times is Hannah Arendt, who also concludes that “To be free is to exercise an opportunity for political participation” (Hiruta, 2021, pp. 66-68). She posits, contrary to liberal freedom, that liberty can never be purely individual, as man always experiences freedom in relation to one another. Furthermore, she claims that political participation has an inherent value and that one thus is not truly free if one does not participate in politics. There is also some significant overlap between the democratic and liberal concept of freedom. Most importantly for this paper, both concepts support so-called civic freedoms. These rights, such as freedom of speech, assembly, or the press, are essential for participating in politics and as such are supported by both liberals as democrats. For the purpose of this paper they are grouped as an aspect of the democratic concept of liberty, due to the fact that these are rights that can only be exercised collectively.

This democratic concept of freedom already contains several important aspects and conceptualizations. At its most base level, it simply argues that without the option to participate in politics, one cannot be free. Furthermore, there are several conceptions we can identify, such as the inherent value of political participation, the idea that freedom only exists as a collective value, or at least in relation to others.

Republican Freedom

The republican, or neo-roman concept of freedom has close ties to both democratic- and liberal conceptions of freedom. Republicans argue that an individual, community or state can only be truly free if they are not dominated by another. Historically this has meant that followers of this concept often argued for democratic and republican forms of government (Skinner, 1998, pp. 21-36). However, such demands are usually a means to achieve societies free of domination by kings or actors seeking to dominate others, not out of any inherent love of democratic participation. Ironically, this has meant that, whereas Arendt and most liberals have agreed that a ‘freedom not to engage in politics’ exists, republicans can be sceptical of this, seeing abstaining from politics as a means of letting yourself be dominated by others (Hiruta, 2021, p. 72). To republican proponents, it does not matter whether or not a dominated person is actually negatively affected by their domination. Regardless of their intentions or behavior, a slaver, (enlightened) monarch, or benevolent overlord impede upon the liberty of their subjects (Skinner, 1998, pp. 72-75). In further disagreement with proponents of the democratic concept of freedom, republican proponents see freedom as both an individual and collective value: whereas a republican democratic government might be needed to avoid domination by kings

and tyrants, individuals can still be dominated within such democratic societies. Lastly, communities or states can also be dominated by other communities or states, putting entire swathes of a population in bondage.

The republican concept of freedom shows important overlap with both democratic and liberal concepts of freedom, highlighting both the importance and connections between collective and individual liberty. At the base level, republican freedom argues against all forms of domination by others. This concept of freedom can be applied to both the individual and the collective, and can thus be closely intertwined with charges of inequality between actors. It can also be used to criticize foreign interference by arguing for non-domination between states.

Liberal Freedom

Liberal Freedom, liberalism, or civil liberty, can broadly be described as the “freedom of individuals to act as they wished, insofar as such acts were not restricted [by law]” (De Dijn, 2020, p. 232). Compared to other concepts of freedom, it has a particular view on government action. Whereas the democratic and republican concept often argue that democracy and equal say in collective decision-making are essential to achieve a form of freedom, liberalism instead argues that true freedom is a measure of protection against actions of all other actors, including the government. While democrats are concerned with “conceiving the designation of those who exercise power [...] Liberalism is a way of conceiving the goal and limits of state power” (De Dijn, 2020, p. 338). This tension between liberty and democracy entails that some rights are ‘inalienable’ and cannot be infringed upon, even by a democratic majority. This focus on individual rights has another important implication, namely that the form of government in which an individual lives is irrelevant for their freedom, as long as their inalienable rights are respected (De Dijn, 2020, pp. 231-234). In the contemporary scene, one of the most influential contributors to this concept of liberty is Berlin (2002), who divides liberty in two important conceptualizations (although confusingly, he calls them concepts). Berlin argues that there is both a negative and positive version of liberty. Of these two, he believes the negative conception, which argues that freedom is the absence of external interference, to be the preferred conceptualization of liberty. As humans are fundamentally beings that make choices between a plurality of different values, removing any external barriers in such a choice maximizes effective freedom (Berlin, 2002, pp. 170-178). Positive liberty, on the other hand, is called the liberty of self-mastery by Berlin. Whereas obstacles to negative liberty are external barriers, obstacles to positive liberty are internal barriers, such as ‘lower passions’ or addiction. Berlin is sceptical of this conception of liberty, for he argues that many governments have often

‘externalized’ such internal barriers. In attempts to remove ‘internal’ barriers that a government deems to be problematic, they might enact draconic measures. In doing so, governments might actually abuse positive liberty in a way that actually limits choices available to individuals (Hiruta, 2021, pp. 59-60). Lastly, one of the inalienable rights that is often touted by liberals is the right to property (Nozick, 1974). Given the important role of the EU in matters of trade and economy, I add this as a specific conceptualization.

The liberal concept of freedom differs quite drastically from other concepts discussed here. It focusses almost exclusively on individual freedoms. In fact, as far as it is concerned with government and collective action, it is mostly on how to protect certain inalienable rights from (collective) political decisions. Certain strands, such as Berlins’ make an important distinction between positive and negative forms of liberty, along with normative judgement on these conceptualizations. Lastly, certain conceptualizations focus heavily on the inalienable right to property and other economic rights.

Coding

Based on these different concepts of liberty, each with different conceptualizations within them, it is possible to come up with a typology that properly distinguishes between these different conceptualizations, but also keeps the overarching concept intact. This typology has two levels of granularity. First, each keyword is classified as one of three concepts: the liberal, democratic, or republican concepts of freedom. After this, they are further categorized as conceptualizations within each concept. For the liberal concept, these constitute a focus on either individual rights or economic rights. If such a focus is present, it will be classified as such. If it is absent, the keyword will be classified as a generic liberal conceptualization. The same happens for the democratic and republican keywords. democratic keywords can be further subdivided into conceptualizations focussing on public participation and civic rights, conceptualizations focussing on media freedom, or generic democratic conceptualizations. Republican keywords can be subdivided into conceptualizations focussing on non-domination, foreign interference, or fall in a generic republican category.

TABLE 1: TYPOLOGY OF CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FREEDOM

<i>IDEA/VALUE</i>	<i>Freedom</i>		
<i>CONCEPTS</i>	<i>Liberal Freedom</i>	<i>Democratic Freedom</i>	<i>Republican Freedom</i>
<i>CONCEPTUALIZATIONS</i>	<i>Individual rights</i>	<i>Public participation/civic rights</i>	<i>Non-domination</i>
	<i>Economic Freedoms</i>	<i>Media freedom</i>	<i>Lack of foreign interference</i>
	<i>Liberal - Generic</i>	<i>Democratic - Generic</i>	<i>Republican - Generic</i>

Coding Procedure

After creating the typology, all speeches which either contained ‘freedom’, ‘freedoms’, ‘liberty’, or ‘liberties’ were collected. In total, 476 speeches held between the 1st of December 2019 and the 31st of January 2024 contained these keywords at least once, for a total of 1024 keywords: 845 instances of ‘freedom’, 135 instances of ‘freedoms’, 32 instances of ‘liberty’ and 12 instances of ‘liberties’. Each of these keywords were subsequently categorized according to the codebook (Appendix A) that follows the aforementioned typology. In total, 275 of the keywords were impossible to categorize, leaving 749 categorizable keywords. Notes were also kept while coding the variables. These notes include references to noteworthy conceptualizations, examples of different conceptualizations, or other information which could be considered of importance. These notes are integrated with the discussion of the quantitative results. This is important, as only discussing the quantitative results might obscure important findings. For example, though the quantitative data is unsuited to detect changes over time, several significant events have had effects on conceptualizations that were noticed during coding.

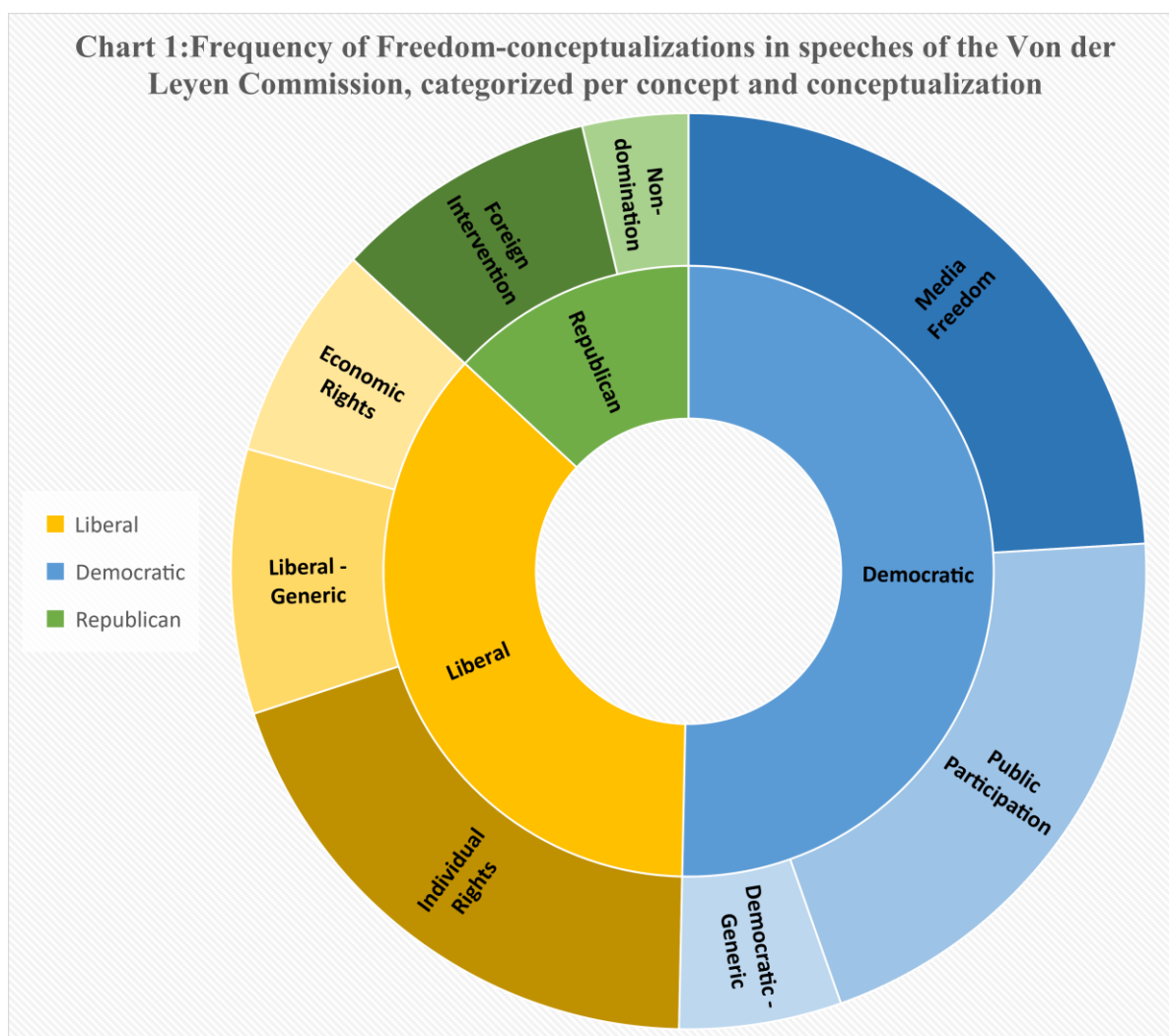
Results

After coding all 749 categorizable keywords as described above, table 2 shows the frequency with which every conceptualization appears throughout the speeches, while graph 1 shows the relative presence of each conceptualization. Of all concepts, the democratic concept appears most often, whereas the republican concept appears the least. The democratic conceptualizations that focus on public participation/civic rights and media freedom are discussed the most often, the former appearing on 154 occasions and the latter on 180 occasions. This is significant, as it suggests a narrow focus on certain aspects of the democratic concept of freedom that is prevalent among the Commission, instead of a more all-encompassing focus on the democratic concept of freedom. Furthermore, the ‘generic’ conceptualization of republican freedom is non-existent in the corpus. Instead, all appearances of the republican

concept could be categorized into either the conceptualizations focussing on non-domination or foreign interference. The liberal concept of freedom is slightly more evenly distributed between the different conceptualizations, with the conceptualization of Individual rights appearing most often. Although not visible in the data, during the coding process it became apparent that certain conceptualizations fluctuated in appearance throughout time. For instance, the conceptualization that focusses on the absence of foreign domination became much more prevalent in speeches after the 2022 Russian military invasion of Ukraine. The freedom of movement, often categorized as either an individual or economic right depending on context within the speech, also became much less prevalent in the corpus after the end of the Coronavirus pandemic. Lastly, a particular detail that I noticed was the fact that Hungary and other democratically backsliding states were relatively absent in all analysed speeches compared to what one might expect. In the sections below, I will shortly discuss findings on each individual conceptualization, as well as noteworthy or significant examples from the corpus.

TABLE 2:FREQUENCY OF FREEDOM CONCEPTUALIZATIONS IN SPEECHES OF THE COMMISSION-VON DER LEYEN

CONCEPT	Conceptualization	Frequency
LIBERAL	Generic	70
	Individual rights	147
	Economic rights	57
DEMOCRATIC	Generic	43
	Public participation/Civic rights	154
	Media freedom	180
REPUBLICAN	Generic	0
	Non-Domination	28
	Foreign interference	70
TOTAL		749



Liberal – Generic

The generic liberal conceptualization – that is to say, those keywords that fall within the concept of liberal freedom, but lack any specific conceptualization – appears 70 times throughout the corpus. In these speeches, freedom is often compared with a certain notion of (inalienable) rights or the rule of law. The freedom to choose and to decide one's destiny also appear frequently. In these cases, overlap with the republican concept of freedom can occur. For instance, in the following two speeches by Commissioner Frans Timmermans, which both concern European energy policy following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Commissioner makes essentially the same argument, while using different conceptualizations of freedom:

Renewable energy give us the freedom to choose. Renewables provide an energy source that is clean, cheap, reliable, and ours. Instead of continuing to send tax payers' money to Russia and Putin's oligarchs, we keep it here and generate new jobs for European citizens. (European Commission, 2022b).

Now, as a key technology to wean ourselves off Russian gas and oil, hydrogen has become part of the answer to help Europe and the world gain freedom in the true sense of the word. Hydrogen is an essential part of Europe's future energy sovereignty. (European Commission, 2022c).

In the first speech, Timmermans firmly puts the agency and freedom to choose in the hands of 'us' (meaning European citizens). The choice in question is whether to continue to fund the Russian government, or invest in renewable energy. Although he states that this freedom is given by renewable energy, he refrains from entertaining the idea that Europeans are in any way dominated by another actor, be it Russia, renewable energy, or fossil fuels. In the second speech however, this is very much the case. He posits that a dependency on Russian gas and oil are a threat to European freedom and energy sovereignty. In this way, he frames freedom as an ideal that can be achieved when dependency (and thus domination) are absent. In my typology, the first quote is classified as 'liberal – generic', whereas the second quote would be classified as 'foreign interference'. This example already shows how these concepts can frequently overlap, or be used almost interchangeably. In this case, the different conceptualizations were used by the same Commissioner, on the same issue, merely two months apart.

Individual freedoms

This conceptualization was often one of the most straightforward to categorize. The category largely consists out of specific individual freedoms which are called upon in a speech, such as

the freedom of religion or the freedom of movement (European Commission, 2021a) & (European Commission, 2021b). In total, these occurred 147 times. However, there are some notable exceptions to this. Certain interpretations of ‘freedoms as rights’ categorically fall under different conceptualizations. Freedom of speech, expression, and assembly, which are common in the corpus, are categorically classified as the democratic conceptualization of ‘public participation/civic rights’. Furthermore, freedom of the press and media freedom are classified as ‘media freedom’. Lastly, certain freedoms, such as the freedom to negotiate wages and the four freedoms are categorised as ‘economic rights’. For instance, when a Commissioner argues that ‘one of the freedoms we don't have is around free movement of capital’, this is categorized as an economic right (European Commission, 2023). The lack of a single category which includes *all* individual rights is a deceptive aspect of my chosen typology. Therefore, although it allows for a more detailed analysis, it is important to note that the underlying liberal conceptualization of freedom as certain inalienable individual rights is significantly more widespread than this category might suggest. A final detail that can be considered significant is the fact that the specific keyword ‘freedoms’ was often classified as either ‘liberal – generic’, ‘economic rights’ or ‘individual freedoms’ due to the fact that many Commissioners used the words ‘freedoms’ and ‘rights’ quite interchangeably.

Economic rights.

The category of economic rights is also quite straightforward to categorize. It mostly consists of references to the four freedoms and to the economic consequences of the freedom of movement. This can partially be attributed to the end of the coronavirus pandemic, when freedom of movement was more restricted. In total, the conceptualization is mentioned 57 times.

Democratic – Generic

The generic democratic conceptualization – that is to say, those keywords that fall within the concept of democratic freedom, but lack any specific conceptualization – occurs 43 times throughout the corpus. In comparison to the specific conceptualizations of the democratic concept, media freedom and public participation/civic rights, this is a relatively small amount. Most often, it is invoked either by equating freedom and democracy, or positing that without democracy, freedom cannot be achieved. Autocracy is also regularly invoked as standing in opposition to freedom, implying some measure of democracy to essential for freedom. See for instance this speech by Commissioner Suica:

It is not dramatic to say that globally, we face a pivotal moment for democracy. War is raging in our neighbourhood. A wave of autocracy sees one-third of the world's population living in countries where freedom and openness are being curtailed. (European Commission, 2022e).

One could argue that technically, Suica could still refer to the curtailment of individual rights within autocracies and thus utilize another conceptualization of freedom. However, she clearly views autocracy as both antithetical to democracy and a danger to freedom. In her conceptualization, democracy promotes freedom. Therefore, this instance of freedom was categorized as ‘democratic – generic’.

Media Freedom

The conceptualization ‘media freedom’ was the most frequently used conceptualization of freedom, with 180 mentions in total. This yields several theories of how the Commission conceptualizes freedom. The freedom of the press as well as its importance in defending freedom and preventing democratic backsliding are mentioned continuously throughout the corpus. However, there is one more reason for the prevalence of this conceptualization. The Media Freedom Act, a piece of legislation adopted by the Commission in an effort to guarantee media freedom in the member states, is often mentioned. This means that a significant share of keywords categorized as this conceptualization are simply referring to the name of this legislation, instead of the principle of media freedom itself. However, the fact that the Media Freedom Act is so prevalent in the discourse on freedom is in itself significant. In almost all speeches Commissioners frame this legislation as essential for guaranteeing (press) freedom. For example, in a speech that mentioned media freedom no less than thirteen times, Commissioner Jourová described media freedom as “the foundation of every single right you have” and declared that “defending media freedom means defending our democracy” (European Commission, 2021g). Statements such as these are prevalent in the corpus. As such, it can be said that the Commission views media freedom as an essential aspect of freedom and paramount in preventing democratic backsliding.

Public participation/civic rights

The democratic conceptualization of ‘Public participation/civic rights’ is the second most common conceptualization of freedom in the corpus, appearing 154 times. The vast majority of these conceptualizations were instances in which either the freedom of speech or the freedom of expression were mentioned. As mentioned previously, these freedoms can often also be considered conceptualizations of the liberal concept of freedom and it is important to remember

this when interpreting these results. Furthermore, this conceptualization is often invoked in quite specific manners. Firstly, it is often mentioned as a variant of media freedom. Commissioner Jourová says as much when she posits that, for her, it “is about the freedom of speech. The people need media to control us in power, not to bow to the power” (European Commission, 2021d). Secondly, when discussing the possibility of democratic backsliding, the importance of freedom of speech and expression is often alluded to. A third element that is prevalent is the freedom of (online) expression, how this interacts with disinformation campaigns, and how to tackle disinformation without infringing on the freedom of speech:

Disinformation is so dangerous because it uses our freedoms against us. It turns freedom of speech into a weapon, and if we want to preserve democracy, freedom of speech is sacrosanct (European Commission, 2021c).

This focus on media independence and quality of information is telling. It shows that the Commission puts great emphasis on the equal right to participate in a democracy that is open and free of disinformation. However, these conceptualizations do eschew normative judgements on the manner in which European citizens should participate in a such a public domain once these freedoms of speech, expression and media are achieved.

Republican – generic

There are no appearances of the republican concept of liberty that cannot be categorized into either the conceptualization of non-domination or foreign interference. This is mostly due to the fact that an instance of republican freedom in which there is no mention of domination, be it by a foreign or domestic actor, is quite rare to find. In practice, such a conceptualization would entail a situation in which a dominating hierarchy is mentioned where (practically) no domination exists, or can exist.

Non-domination

The conceptualization of ‘non-domination’ is probably the most diverse category in this paper. The 28 times it is mentioned include subjects as diverse as forced labour, domestic abuse and (the lack of) criminal incarceration (European Commission, 2021e) & (European Commission, 2021f). Even grave war crimes, such as the forced internment and extermination at Auschwitz are included in this category:

For those who managed to escape extermination, the months and years that followed were often filled with yet more pain and torment. The liberation meant freedom, but not the end of suffering (European Commission, 2020).

Classification of cases such as these are difficult, as there are few conceptualizations of freedom which were not gravely infringed upon in this period. However, due to the fact that freedom explicitly refers to the liberation from Auschwitz and thus the removal from bondage, I categorized this as a conceptualization of ‘non-domination’. This despite the fact that liberal and democratic concepts of freedom were also breached by grave means. A somewhat similar situation occurred when coding a speech which contained several references to the fight for freedom of Iranian women. Unfortunately, for these women freedom was lacking in several key ways, and even within the context of the speech, I was unable to categorize these instances of freedom.

Foreign interference

The conceptualization of ‘foreign interference’, in contrast to ‘non-domination’, is exceptionally uniform in its usage by the Commission, as all 70 instances nearly universally refer to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its direct consequences, or previous domination of Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union. As such, this conceptualization only starts to significantly appear after the start of the Russian invasion in 2022. Phrases which state ‘that the Ukrainians were determined to fight for their freedom’, or equate Ukrainian freedom with Ukrainian independence are common (European Commission, 2022a) & (European Commission, 2024). However, there is still a measure of overlap between the democratic and republican concept of liberty, in particular when discussing the republican conceptualization ‘foreign interference’. For instance, consider the following excerpt of a speech given by Commissioner Von der Leyen.

A foreign empire was attacking the free cities of Greece. But in the strait of Salamis, the Greek alliance achieved an unlikely victory against a much stronger enemy. Historians and poets described that war in very clear terms: For the first time in history, autocracy attacked democracy. And autocracy failed, while democracy prevailed. In the words of Aeschylus, the Greeks ‘tore the yoke apart’ because they were ‘slaves to no lord’. Unlike their foes, the Greeks were fighting not for the greed of a single man, but for their own freedom. (European Commission, 2022d).

In her speech, Von der Leyen very clearly creates two opponents: The Greeks on the side of democracy, against the Persians on the side of autocracy. Therefore, it may appear logical to classify this excerpt as ‘democratic – generic’. However, in this case, as often occurs when discussing Ukraine in the corpus, it merely happens to be that a democratic actor is fighting for freedom against foreign oppression against an autocratic actor. When Ukraine, or the Greek cities, would lose the war, they would primarily be dominated by a foreign (autocratic) actor,

which in turn would threaten democratic rule. As such, the freedom that is being described is primarily a freedom from foreign interference, which coincides with a threat to the democratic concept of freedom. Of course, the fact that republican and democratic freedoms coincide is most likely the reason Von der Leyen uses the battle of Salamis as an example. It is therefore important to note that while the republican concept of freedom is dominant in the discourse surrounding Ukraine, the Commission has often combined aspects and conceptualizations of the democratic concept of freedom in their discourse.

Discussion

Before drawing a conclusion, it is important to highlight some important insights and limits of this content analysis. As stated previously, this research method is unable to detect quantitatively significant differences across periods of time, apart from those differences noticed by the coder, nor can it detect ideological differences between individual Commissioners. As such, more detailed data might be missed. In the same vein, it should be noted that this paper only studied speeches given by the Von der Leyen Commission. As such, it could be possible that previous, or future Commission compositions could possibly differ in their interpretation of freedom. Furthermore, just over a quarter of the 1024 keywords, 275 to be exact, were too vague or without context to be categorized. Although this still leaves a comfortable amount of categorizable keywords, it should be noted that ‘uncategorizable’ could be considered the single largest conceptualization in this paper. Moreover, despite the initial mission statement of this paper, concrete mentions of specific instances of democratic backsliding within the EU are relatively scarce. There are ample mentions of threats towards democratic institutions, especially when the democratic concept of freedom, and its conceptualizations, are invoked, but in general Commission refrains from mentioning member states or like Hungary, Slovakia or Poland, or other responsible actors, by name. However, this reluctance to mention these countries could be considered a finding in and of itself. Lastly, as was mentioned when discussing the typology and certain conceptualizations, it should be emphasized that the different concepts and conceptualizations of freedom are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they often show significant overlap. For example, the conceptualizations of ‘public participation’ and ‘media freedom’ often show a distinct agreement with the liberal concept of freedom in their common appreciation of individual rights such as the freedom of speech. Nevertheless, this typology does show how and when the Commission chooses to highlight certain aspects or conceptualizations of freedom over others.

Conclusion

In this research paper I set out to find how the European Commission interprets the European value of freedom. I have done so by conducting a content analysis of all speeches given by the Von der Leyen Commission that included the words ‘freedom’, ‘freedoms’, ‘liberty’ or ‘liberties’. Following this content analysis, I conclude that, quantitatively speaking, the democratic conception of freedom is the most common interpretation of freedom within the European Commission.

However, this conclusion should be supplemented with a few qualitative judgements that arise from these same speeches. The Commission differentiates between different concepts and conceptualizations of freedom depending on the situation. When discussing the war in Ukraine, the republican concept of freedom and its conceptualization of independence from foreign actors are dominant, whereas when discussing democratic backsliding, the democratic concept of freedom and its conceptualizations are prevalent. When discussing the Coronavirus pandemic, the Commission adopted the liberal concept of freedom. Furthermore, when the Commission adopts the democratic concept of freedom, for instance when arguing against democratic backsliding or the prevalence of misinformation, they often assert that the best avenue to protect this democratic freedom are civic rights such as the freedom of speech and press freedom. In my typology, these rights are categorized as a conceptualization of democratic freedom due to their importance in the functioning of a democracy, but the suggestion that freedom is best protected by guaranteeing certain inalienable rights is also a fundamentally liberal conception of freedom.

Therefore, a more extensive conclusion, which combines the quantitative and qualitative insights provided by this research, is that the European Commission is able to adapt and adopt different concepts and conceptualizations of freedom, often in response to a situation that infringes on these concepts. In doing so, the democratic concept of freedom appeared most in Commission discourse. However, when attempting to counteract these infringements, with the exception of the war in Ukraine, the language used by the Commission to propose a solution can be incongruent with the conception of freedom that is being infringed upon. When talking of democratic backsliding, which according to the Commission infringes on the democratic concept of freedom, solutions proposed by that same Commission are suggested using language that suggest a liberal conception of freedom. Further research is required to determine whether this relapse towards the liberal conception is systematic, or whether this is specific to this case.

This paper contributes to the literature on the European values and democratic backsliding by researching how the European Commission, the guardian of the treaties and thereby the European values themselves, interprets one of these values. By doing this, I have laid out the flexible, though reactive, approach the European Commission has in regards to this value. Furthermore, I have found incongruities between the Commissions' conception of freedom when discussing the impact of democratic backsliding compared to their conception of freedom when proposing solutions to democratic backsliding. This incongruity might help explain the ineffectiveness of EU measures to combat democratic backsliding. Further research could focus on how to resolve such incongruities, or explore the conceptualization of other European values and how these impact democratic backsliding.

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Appendix A: Codebook bachelor project 2024 Michiel van Alst

1. Column one

Information concerning the Speech:

Title, Date, Hyperlink

2. Column two

Contains information on how many times the article contains the key words ‘freedom’, ‘freedoms’, ‘liberty’, or ‘liberties’. One notes the total amount each word appears in the text of the speech. If one of the words appears in the title, this instance should not be counted, as these words were not said at the speech itself.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

3. Column three

Contains information on how many times the “liberal – generic” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This choice is made when the liberal concept of freedom is meant, but it is not possible to determine whether individual rights, or economic rights were mentioned. For example, when a commissioner equates freedom with civil rights, but it is unclear whether these are individual rights. Or when the freedom of choice is mentioned and it is unclear whether this choice was otherwise constrained by a lack of positive or negative liberty, or another actor.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

4. Column four

Contains information on how many times the “liberal – individual rights” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This choice is made when the keyword specifically mentions the freedoms/rights that can be exercised by an individual, such as the freedom of religion or marriage.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

5. Column five

Contains information on how many times the “liberal – Economic freedoms” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. These refer explicitly to the rights of

companies, the Four economic freedoms, or rights that are explicitly mentioned as a means to promote economic activity in the speech.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

6. Column six

Contains information on how many times the “democratic – generic” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This choice is made when the democratic concept of freedom is meant, but it is not possible to determine whether media freedom, or public participation/civic rights were mentioned. This includes conceptualizations where it is argued that freedom cannot exist in an autocracy, freedom is equated with democracy, or freedom is explicitly tied to democratic institutions, such as elections.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

7. Column seven

Contains information on how many times the “democratic – media freedom” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This choice is made when the keyword explicitly refers to media freedom, or stresses freedom of the press as an integral part of freedom.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

8. Column eight

Contains information on how many times the “democratic – public participation” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This choice is made when freedom is equated with things like public participation, civic freedoms such as the freedom of assembly or the freedom of speech are mentioned, or when deterrents to democratic participation are mentioned as a threat to freedom.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

9. Column nine

Contains information on how many times the “Republican – generic” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This choice is made when the republican concept of freedom is meant, but it is not possible to determine whether foreign interference or non-domination were mentioned. This category would include critiques against non-

dominating hierarchies (such as constitutional monarchies), or a conceptualization of freedom as autonomy.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

10. Column ten

Contains information on how many times the “Republican – non-domination” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This can refer to all instances in which a (non-foreign) actor attempts or succeeds in restricting someone in their freedom. Be it through slavery or other, less intrusive means. Can also be applicable if one is only free when they are no longer dependent on another actor.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

11. Column eleven

Contains information on how many times the “Republican – foreign interference” conception is represented by one of the keywords in the text. This is applicable if freedom is characterized as independence from another country, or when freedom is said to be threatened by the interference of another country.

Code: “*Number of times that this conceptualization appears*”

12. Column twelve

Contains information on how many times it was not possible to attach any category to one of the keywords in the text. This can be because the keyword is part of a generic name or slogan, because the keyword is used as a buzzword, or because it is simply not possible to distinguish between several conceptions

Code: “*Number of times that this lack of conceptualization appears*”

13. Column thirteen

If necessary, leave room for comments or justification for chosen code.

Appendix B: Bibliography of analyzed speeches

- European Commission. (2019, December 1). *Statement by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during the ceremony at the House of European History to mark the 10th anniversary of the Treaty of Lisbon and the start of the mandate of the new College of Commissioners* [Speech transcript]. European Commission Press Corner.
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