**The Phenomenon of Unpopular Political Decisions:**

**Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Trends in Terms of the Transitional State**

**Olga Trokhinova**

**Abstract**

This article describes the phenomenon of an unpopular political decision, which combines various interpretations of this scholarly definition being new for political science. Along with the phenomenon that looks greatly interesting for modern humanity science, its communication support is also of importance for studying. An unpopular political decision becomes a commonplace in the modern theory of political transition, due to the dominant role of the state which plays a pivotal role in this process. The article discusses the practice of the communication support towards the Russian pension reform which turned out to be cornerstone of public debates in this country in the last few years. .

**Keywords:** unpopular political decision, media, consensus, interest, communication

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**Introduction**

The general atmosphere of social tension is inherent to many modern states, regions and cities. Social tension turns out to be a special socio-political priority absorbed by increased anxiety, fear and aggression of the public or its individual groups towards authorities being responsible for resolving these issues but incapable to do something practically. Mass protest activity becomes the most serious consequence of overall social tension, as it calls into question the possibility of reproduction of the political system. Therefore, the dominance of these insights can destroy the existing status quo between public institutions and individual groups or actors being a part and parcel of the population. The emergence of social tension, and, even more, its exacerbation, may be linked to unpopular political decisions.

The implementation of measures affecting the vital interests of citizens may lead to shifting priorities of the political power. This seems to be motivating to identify communication technologies that transform unpopular political decisions into socially acceptable ones. These technologies do not seem to be radical methods that become increasingly relevant in hectic situations, but they stimulate active penetration to political decision-making through means of communications. These approaches contribute to legitimize decisions and practical steps made by the authorities.

Legitimacy of power universally becomes the key to the effective development of various spheres of public life and consists of legitimacy of all steps taken along this way. It is necessary to speak in this regard not only about providing legislative support to these decisions, but also on their social recognition. Modern society undoubtedly has an opportunity to evaluate the actions of political actors through communication channels and especially media, due to a pivotal role played by this political institution. The authorities, in turn, are greatly interested in managing the information sphere, which serves as a real or potential supporter of their activities. Thanks to this, any state decision can acquire new features. Thus, the questions that seem to be pivotal are as follows: how to rationally control the information space and what are the principles that should guide actors during the media discourse?

This study is based on two important aspects. Firstly, the media space has rapidly expanded its horizons today. This occurs not only due to general growth of communication actors, but also thanks to increased interaction between traditional and online media. All these frameworks are absorbed by highly intertwined integration and interpenetration, which opens up a possibility to increase a number of active citizens articulating their interests. This articulation concerns the process by which individuals and groups promote their demands to political decision makers. On the one hand, this situation increases risks, and a loss of control from the state, and on the other hand, in these terms there exists a real opportunity for civil society to keep on developing. Secondly, the bulk of previous scientific research in the field of political decision making theory has focused on the development of decision making models. The specifics of unpopular political decisions makes it possible to reveal nuances of communication support and simultaneously to look at the technological stages of decision-making from a fundamentally new angle of view and to combine political and communicative approaches.

The focus of this article is the results of the implementation of unpopular political decisions on the example of a transitional state represented in this regard by Russia.

According to Beetham (1991), the phenomenon of legitimacy stays between the norms and rules shared by most members of a community and the ways in which power is exercised in it. Legitimacy of power is based on three grounds: legality, consent and conformity of power decisions to the interests and values of the community. In turn, Suchman (1995) is convinced that legitimation is a process that ensures gradual acceptance by the community of an object or phenomenon that begins to be perceived as desirable, acceptable, and consistent with the system of norms, values, and beliefs of the majority.

Is the power of a transitional state capable of optimizing and legitimizing a potentially unpopular decision? Are there communication channels or platforms for dialogue for this? Can the media become such a platform? This article I aimed on answering these questions.

**Theoretical Background**

This article is based on modern Russian experience of making unpopular political decisions. It is reasonable to understand why Russia is regarded as a transition state and what content this concept has. This type of state is characterized by a transitional economy and the development of socio-economic reforms. Russia is considered as a country having so-called a “medium stage” of a reform (Philipov and Dorbritz, 2003: 12) In the meantime, its transition from a socialist to a capitalist system, evolution towards democracy, priorities of the national market development and a set of reforms have led to changing the standard of living, values and ideas of citizens. There are the changes within the system of social relations when new institutions appear (Kaser, 1997). Many modern researchers designate a transitional state as that one inherited to post-Soviet states (Van Elsuwege, 2008; The World Bank, 2002; Rosefielde, 2001).

In turn, what is the main idea of transition? In the classical sense, this personifies a move out to a social democratic state, being dominant by the highest level of responsibility to its citizens (Aslund, 1994). However, the very existence of unpopular political decisions suggests a lack of orientation towards the interests of large social groups: the interests of the state and citizens do not coincide. In addition, the transition state focuses on state interests and on the satisfaction of the interests of individual groups, the so-called power elite. In such a state, public interests are practically not taken into account. The differences between these types of interests will be described below.

The so-called transitional states can be called the states of «extreme existence», which lack the necessary social base and effective support from all sectors of the population. Under favorable internal and external conditions, they are able to transfer to the main historical type of state in a different institutional quality, but they can also “roll back”, become totalitarian, authoritarian states. (Levchenkov, 2014).

Speaking about the phenomenon of unpopular political decision, it is worth noting that in American and European studies this topic is practically not affected. This is due to traditional ideas about classical democracy, in which citizens choose their representatives and delegate the opportunity to represent their interests. Making an unpopular political decision is seen as political suicide and marks the end of a political career (Beschloss, 2018). On the other hand, the phenomenon of unpopular political decisions is being studied by Russian scholars. This happened, due to the transitional period of the development of the state and various reforms carried out by the Russian government. Those decisions have repeatedly threatened state security and led to widespread social protests. An unpopular political decision is considered from various aspects: In terms of communication support (Kostina, 2007; Amatov, 2011) and in terms of opposing interest groups (Shabrova, 2013; Churashova, 2013). For government the unpopular political solution is “the lesser of two evils” principle, an objective necessity contributing to the achievement of the final goal.

Legitimacy of a political decision can affect legitimacy of any government and have an impact from citizens who cannot demonstrate their trust or mistrust to these motivations. Meanwhile, unpopular political decisions can reduce the level of trust and influence the formation of a society’s request for a change of power. Using the findings of researchers and relying on the results of own research, including content analysis and interviews with Russian political experts, this article attempts to comprehensively analyze the phenomenon of an unpopular political decision, and makes sense of the experience of their implementation and communication support. An attempt was also made to assess the possibility of legitimizing an unpopular political decision.

Also, in the research process, the author's definition of an unpopular political decision was revealed. The author implies by it a decision, directly or indirectly influencing the degree of satisfaction of basic needs of citizens, contrary to public interests, having the potential to change the system of public relations, traditions and values, characterized by a sharply negative public assessment of administrative actions of the ruling subject.

**Legitimation and responsibility**

The issue of legitimizing a political decision in a transitional state is rather complicated from the point of view of theoretical understanding and practical implementation. The main difficulty lies in the lack of real platforms for dialogue in the format of “society - power”, as well as in a high degree of state participation in the life of the media, in attempts to tightly control the media space. Nevertheless, if we consider an unpopular political decision as an integral part of the political process (radical measures are necessary to overcome the crisis), it is important to emphasize the need for communication support as a subject-subject interaction between the government and society. The purpose of such communication is to influence each other. The first of this influence is a change in a potentially unpopular decision and its optimization, the second is legitimation based on the agreement reached. In a transitional state, legitimation processes are complicated by a high level of social uncertainty and insecurity. The interests and requirements of large groups of the population are not satisfied.

The specificity of the state is in its role as a mechanism for coordinating public interests. The emergence of the state as a public institution, as a political power structure, is connected, first of all, with the administration of common functions, realization of common interests, with the need to regulate political, economic, social relations within this community and ensuring its interests in external relations. With the advent of the state, the norms of relations between citizens are legally fixed, which become binding and are supported by the law enforcement agencies of the state. State interest is expressed in the functions in the field of foreign and domestic policy - in preserving and strengthening its role in the international arena, integrity, sovereignty, economic development, welfare of citizens and much more. The interest of the state is also equated with the group of factors working to preserve and strengthen the power of public power organization.

The state realizes joint public interests, but can be considered as a carrier of a special specific form of interest. In considering the question of balancing the interests of the state with the interests and needs of the population, it is worth noting the interpretation of the so-called social function of the state. The state, society and the individual, in which the newly emerging tasks and goals of individuals, society and the state will be institutionally normalized, and the energy of individuals will be constantly directed towards achieving common goals. This will ensure the sustainability and integration of a differentiated society. There is a need to reach some kind of public consensus as the type of agreement.

On the one hand, reaching consensus and exercising public authority without a large-scale mass communication system is not possible. On the other hand, the nature of the transition state and the elements of authoritarianism do not allow society to communicate effectively with the authorities. In addition, the government is trying to satisfy state, not public, interests. However, the stories are familiar with episodes of the coincidence of state interest and public interest in national interest.

In Russian modern history, such an example was expressed in the phenomenal support for the authorities after the Crimean referendum in 2014, which overshadowed the consequences of the crisis of legitimacy of the authorities in 2011.

The "Crimean consensus" was pushed up by the idea of unifying people and the powers. According to experts, depending on the methods of research and the accents in the survey questionnaires, the social base of this consensus was from 85 to 95 percent of the citizens of the country and was in agreement with the foreign policy position of the President, with the reunification with Crimea, with the attitude to the rebellious Donbas, as well as with the categorical rejection of any revolutionary scenario of change of power within the country[[1]](#footnote-1). During this period, historical maximums of support of the Russian population to the President V.V. Putin became a reality. In the period under review, a relatively high voter turnout was recorded for the elections, with a difficult economic situation in the country, sanctions being imposed and the ruble falling against the backdrop of rising oil prices. This is reflected in the standard of living of citizens, but does not cause protests or increase the level of social tension, and the domestic political situation remains very stable.

K. Haase explains in this regard: "We have seen in the polls since 2014 that 86% of Russians support President Vladimir Putin. What does this support mean? This is not support that can be seen in terms of working democracy - it is a value consensus: President Vladimir Putin expresses the interests of the Russian nation, and in expressing its interests, he can afford a number of actions that make Russians poorer in the short term. This was the meaning of the "Crimean consensus. The political protest against the Kremlin in this sense was a protest against the Russian nation”[[2]](#footnote-2).

Following the communication support of political decisions, the period of "Crimean consensus" is determined by a mixture of domestic national and foreign policy agendas, increasing communication aggression against political opponents. In addition, this phenomenon has become a unique factor in almost instantaneous legitimation of all political decisions: either the population supports often harsh government measures or the risk of a revolutionary change of power, which is contrary to the interests of the majority.

The years of 2018-2019 are characterized by the emergence of protest moods, antigovernment agenda, mass rallies in Moscow, St. Petersburg, in some regions for the first time a tense electoral situation is emerging. Experts of the Russian Association of Public Relations Specialists agreed that the anti-establishment wave that has reached Russia means the end of the “Crimean consensus” (Report of the Committee on Political Technologies of the RASO, 2018). They noted the growth of distrust towards elites, traditional media. It is during this period that the most radical reforms in the field of the pension system. The analysis of the information field around the transformation of the pension system, which began in 2018, allows us to focus on the need for systematic, long-term communication work with both the external public and internal executors, ranging from the top officials of the state to local officials. At the same time, the study of the communication actions taken by the authorities allows identifying both manipulative tools and the most effective methods.

Pension reform in Russia was carried out in 2018 in the context of the end of the Crimean consensus. What is the essence of Russian pension reform? On June 16, 2018, by order of the Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation, D. A. Medvedev, a draft law on pension reform in Russia was introduced into the State Duma. The project to reform the pension system in the country provided for a gradual increase in the retirement age for most citizens from January 1, 2019.

Initially, it was planned to increase the retirement age to 65 years for men (during 2019–2028) and to 63 years for women (during 2019–2034). In this version, on July 19, 2018, the Duma adopted the bill in first reading. In the future, about 300 amendments were received: in particular, on August 29, President V.V. Putin proposed raising the bar for women not up to 63, but up to 60 years. In the second reading, on September 26, the bill was adopted as amended by Putin and the party “United Russia” the entire block of amendments from opposition parties and trade unions was rejected. The third reading was on September 27th. Then, on October 3, the bill was approved by the Federation Council, and on the same day, the President of the Russian Federation signed the law.

**The public reaction**

The 2018 pension reform was a major shock to Russians. Its discussion in the media took place under the conditions of a change of agenda - in the summer of 2018 the news was focused on the World Cup held in Russia.

The World Cup in Russia "paused the normal life of the country"[[3]](#footnote-3), since the media featured headlines about matches and fan stories from around the world. This information droped out the rest of the news, and citizens simply did not have time to pay attention to the topics that would most likely cause a powerful resonance in normal time. The shifted agenda did not make large groups of the population aware of the consequences of the decision. Special external conditions also played a role: for the sake of security during the championship any protests and rallies were banned in the cities where the matches were held. Nevertheless, the reaction of the public was not delayed: a petition on the Internet against increasing the retirement age was signed by more than 2.5 million Russians during the week.

On 9 September, rallies were held all over the country against raising the retirement age, following open clashes between the population and OMON. According to the data of the Department of Internal Affairs-Info, more than 1200 people were detained at the rallies throughout the country, including more than 600 people in St. Petersburg alone. Protests took place throughout the country during 2018. In this regard, Levada-Center analysts note that focus group participants consider themselves deceived by the authorities - they were promised to raise their pensions, but in fact they raised only their retirement age[[4]](#footnote-4).

The experts emphasize that pension reform will affect society as a whole, including customary social roles as well as relationships within families[[5]](#footnote-5). In turn, the research elaborated by VTsIOM (the Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, showed that since June 2018, the index of satisfaction with the actions of the authorities in domestic politics has fallen by almost one and a half times: from 41 points to 28. Such low figures have not been recorded since the beginning of the surveys in 2007[[6]](#footnote-6). Also, since June 2018, there has been a significant increase in the number of respondents assessing the situation in the country as “bad” and “very bad”, the overall index of social assessment of the situation in the country over this period fell from 26 points to 7.

As the *Vedomosti* newspaper commented, intentionally, the emphasis was based on solidarity with the reform. There were two key messages being put on the agenda: women should retire at the age of 60, and Putin is aware of the reform and takes responsibility for it. Third message - discussion on pension reform is closed"[[7]](#footnote-7).

**Behavior of the Russian authorities**

The behavior of the Russian government is of particular interest. Questions about the possible reform of the pension system have been raised over the past 20 years. The most rigid and accurate answer to them was formulated by the head of state V.V. Putin on September 27, 2007 during the “Direct Line”: “At the same time, I would like to draw your attention to this fact that I am against raising the retirement age. As long as I am the president, no such decision will be made. And in general, I believe that we do not need to increase the retirement age”[[8]](#footnote-8). But in 2009, as Prime Minister, V.V. Putin confirmed the impossibility of raising the retirement age in Russia, adding: “Although I would like to draw your attention to the fact that in Italy women's retirement age has been raised to 65”[[9]](#footnote-9).

Nevertheless, the public authorities preparing for the implementation of pension reform have been quite active and, one way or another, have added the topic of raising the retirement age to the agenda over the past few decades, pointing to a promising timeline.

On October 19, 2010, for the first time, Alexei Kudrin, then the Russian Finance Minister, expressed the idea of raising the retirement age: “Gradual raising of the retirement age is possible, but not in one year and not now, but in five years. Men can discuss up to 62 years of age, and women can discuss it closer to 60”[[10]](#footnote-10). In November this year, President Medvedev voiced his position, stressing that no increase in the retirement age is expected in the coming years; changes as such require serious changes and public consent[[11]](#footnote-11). The representatives of the Ministry of Health stated that “it is absolutely wrong to even raise this problem before 2030. To solve this problem, it is necessary to prepare the system beforehand. The best option is to raise a month for each year, two at the most, but not six months and not a year, which is very sharp and causes rejection from the population”[[12]](#footnote-12). In 2013, Labor Minister M. Topylin emphasizes that it will be possible to speak about raising the retirement age in Russia only in the long run, when the average life expectancy will exceed 80 years[[13]](#footnote-13).

Changes in the position declared by the authorities have been gradually taking place since 2014. Thus, at the "Gaidar Forum," the head of the Ministry of Economic Development Alexei Ulyukaev noted the need to discuss the increase in the retirement age and, in general, the revision of the attitude towards pensions, which, according to the Minister, is no longer the main income for many pensioners[[14]](#footnote-14). However, this information is still behind the scenes, although it does leak into the media.

The Finance Minister Anton Siluanov clearly stated a rather tough position in 2015: “The decision [to raise the retirement age] should be made before 2018 and implemented in 2018-2019, so that everyone could know about it in advance. It seems to me that the sooner we say this, the more correct it is going to be, and the more understandable it will be for financiers to form financial plans for the coming years, and the citizens need to prepare morally, especially for those who are close to retirement age. We used to talk about six months a year, but now it is clear that six months won't do anything, we need to increase the retirement age every year.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

On March 14, 2018, Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets in her official comment to journalists stressed that raising of the retirement age in the Government was not discussed[[16]](#footnote-16). 19 July 2018 The Russian State Duma adopts the draft law on raising the retirement age in the first reading.

20 July 2018 President V.V. Putin commented on the decision to carry out pension reform and noted that he did not like any of the proposed options, but that it was necessary to think about the future and the final decision had not been made yet[[17]](#footnote-17). In turn, Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for the Russian president, said that "the presidential administration does not conduct any expert work on changing pension legislation and specified that “all expert work is carried out in the diagonal of the parliament and the government[[18]](#footnote-18)

In October 2018, a few attempts were initiated to hold a national referendum regarding the retirement age, but they all failed.

During the implementation of the pension reform, the government’s reluctance to take responsibility for the results of the reform is clearly visible. In addition, the president took the position of an estranged observer. But obviously citizens expected him to make serious statements until the reform was canceled. However this did not happen, the president solidified with the government, calling the reform forced and necessary.

**Media reflection**

During the adoption of the pension reform, the news of major federal media were devoted to the FIFA 2018 World Cup. Nevertheless, the media provided information about the preparation of the reform, mostly in the form of news-items stating a fact. Obviously, in a transitional state and a high degree of media dependence on the state, not all media could afford to reflect the real social tension and the whole polyphony of opinions around the reform. The subject-object communication is traced, within the framework of which a certain point of view is instilled into the audience. However, in the context of the "urgent" adoption of the reform and in the absence of any public hearings, the media failed to reduce the level of social tension and form new values. But such attempts were made.

Analyzing the communication work aimed at forming public opinion and reducing the level of social tension, two main stages can be noted. At the first stage, communication was built around the idea of active healthy old age. Federal TV channels broadcast programs in prime time dedicated to working pensioners, people engaged in their own business and providing for themselves. Similar materials are published in major online publications, and even social media advertising platforms are used to promote messages.

Social networks and opinion leaders themselves are actively involved in the discussion of pension system reform. Thus, Instagram social networking on the pages of bloggers having multi-million audiences, bring stuff on how important it is to help their grandparents, that pensioners should be taken care of and this is the duty of children and grandchildren. The main communication tool to promote this message was the technology of art retailing: "We met a very nice couple from Russia in Italy, had dinner with us in the same restaurant. This is their fourth trip abroad this year. They say that the first time was a little scary, they don't know the language, but now they have already joined in. During the Soviet Union, few people traveled further than Riga, and many pensioners still seem to have this feeling. However now it is easier to buy a plane ticket and a lot of countries, where you can go without a visa. Those families, who rest with grandparents, a big company like that, are always happy. Not all pensioners are self-sufficient, they need to be taken care of, because who else will show them the world, if not us, their children and grandchildren"[[19]](#footnote-19); "Our parents and grandparents are the people who put the best in us, who raised us. I think we should support them and help them, and above all, financially. Who else can they rely on? For me, family is invaluable! And as long as I can, I will always help them. You remember my grandmother, how can I leave her without a new dress or a suit?"[[20]](#footnote-20)

Obviously, such messages were formed for emotional influence on the population. The influence of the blogosphere on public opinion, values, perception and way of life is quite high and effective in terms of communication, and the mass broadcasting of the same type of messages in the manner of natural communication, "storytelling" especially, contributes to the adoption of new attitudes by society. However, a communication campaign aimed at mitigating the negative perception of pension reform among the population met with a sharp wave of criticism. Users offered bloggers the opportunity to live on pensions and salaries in the regions, noticed that not all members of the working population can afford to travel and generally took such materials negatively and sarcastically. According to experts, the idea of active healthy old age was quickly defeated due to the general socio-economic background and the lack of real growth in income.

The experts of the Levada-Center note that, according to surveys conducted in June 2018, "89% of respondents have a negative attitude to the reform, of which 70% - sharply negative. Most respondents consider the current retirement age to be optimal - 60 years for men (87%) and 55 for women (84%). At the same time, 44% of Russians of pre-retirement age are going to continue working even after retirement, although only 25% of current pensioners work. More than a half (58%) of the pensioners being interviewed quit their jobs due to health problems, and only 14% of them intend to continue working because of the employer's initiative. According to the survey, the average pension is now - 13,266 rubles, while its average minimum required, according to pensioners, is twice as large - 26,196 rubles. The promised increase of 1000 rubles per month does not solve the problem of a sharp decline in the standard of living at retirement, as for 78% of Russians pension is the main source of funds"[[21]](#footnote-21).

The federal media are also involved in covering retirement issues in other countries by comparing existing programs and proposals.

The media are circulating the results of sociological and economic studies, which speak of the need to rise the retirement age. In October 2018, the journal *Economic Issues* published an article by the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev “Russia-2024: Strategy for Socio-Economic Development”, which, among the other things, provided the rationale to rise the retirement age. According to Medvedev, there are currently only two alternatives for the pension reform in the country: a reduction in the real level of pension payments and an increase in contributions to the pension system. Medvedev believed that none of these alternatives were appropriate for the country, and if the reform in this area is not carried out now, this process may be much more rigid and painful in the future (Medvedev, 2018). Thus, the second part of the communication campaign was based on an appeal to rational arguments.

The Russian authorities adopted pension reform in the absence of discussion of the changes with society. Could the media in the current environment serve as a platform for dialogue? This was a very dubious idea. However, the government made attempts to influence public opinion through reactive communications that do not provide feedback. This state of affairs indicates an attempt to use manipulative technologies, and also emphasizes the subject-object nature of communication in a transition state.

Thus, the resonant case of pension reform in Russia shows a serious dissonance in the behavior of different actors. The legitimization of potentially unpopular decisions, their optimization as a result of the authority of the authorities and society is important, but the likelihood of its success encounters a large number of difficulties associated with the behavior of each actor.

**Соnclusion**

Studying the communication support of the pension reform in 2018 reveal hierarchical and democratic types of communication provided by governmental structures and media being loyal to the Kremlin. Potential platforms for dialogue legitimizing the actions of the authorities could be expert councils with the participation of representatives of the public, platforms for voting, including the All-Russian referendum.

The prerequisites for this are formed in the process of political communication practice. However, in terms of a serious divergence of the state and public interests, using of these practices on a national scale does not find its application.

The analysis of the information field concerning transformation of the pension system, which began in 2018, allows focusing on the importance of systematic and long-term communication work with both the external public and internal executors, when ranging from the top officials of the state to local officials. Simultaneously, the study of the communication actions taken by the authorities affords to identify both manipulative tools and the most effective methods. Manipulation technologies still play a significant role in the current practice of unpopular political measures. However, their use is reflected in society's recognition of the current authorities and initiates a latent process of reducing trust, which ultimately leads to the formation of public demand for a change of power. Thus, manipulative technologies hinder the process of reproduction of the political system.

Obviously, the unpopular political decision becomes a factor of public consolidation. The study of its influence on the satisfaction of interests of various disparate groups can contribute to the identification of common expectations and demands for power, which should be taken into account in the formation of cognitive and semantic components of the strategy of communication support of unpopular measures.

The Russian political practice is gradually developing technologies of information and communication support of risky political decisions. They are characterized by the dominant role of political leaders who are ready to assume responsibility for the implementation of political decisions that shape the agenda with the help of the media, media and opinion leaders, primarily through rational arguments used in the political rhetoric around potentially unpopular political measures. At this stage, these technologies are aimed at neutralizing possible protest activity and, to a lesser extent, take into account the interests of different groups of the population.

The questions of theoretical comprehension and legitimation of unpopular political decisions are not exhaustive, they remain open and can find their answers both in further research and in the practical activities of professional communicators.

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