

Strategy for development cooperation with

Belarus

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REGERINGSKANSLIET

Government Offices
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Strategy for development cooperation with Belarus, 2007-2010

Introduction

The Government has approved a proposal to establish a cooperation strategy for development cooperation with Belarus. The cooperation strategy will determine the course of Swedish development cooperation with Belarus during the period 2007–2010. The strategy is based on proposals by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), supplemented by considerations from the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the views of other ministries engaged in development cooperation with Belarus, and the priorities and observations of Swedish cooperation partners with regard to cooperation with Belarus.

1. Executive Summary

In recent years, political power in Belarus has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko. The presidential election of 2006 exposed major deficiencies in terms of democracy and respect for human rights. Prior to the election, a number of new restrictive laws were passed, creating a more hostile environment for civil society and the independent media. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed. According to World Bank estimates, the percentage of poor people in Belarus has fallen in the past few years, while certain other indicators, such as average life expectancy, point in the opposite direction.

Swedish bilateral assistance to Belarus for the period 2002–2005 totalled SEK 138 million. In 2006, investment in bilateral cooperation projects accounted for some SEK 40 million. The objective of development cooperation with Belarus has been to support the modernisation and democratisation of Belarus society and pave the way for future reforms. Another important aim is closer integration with Sweden and Europe. Although efforts have been largely successful in terms of exposing people to basic democratic and market economy values, they have not resulted in actual policy changes. There is ample evidence to suggest that the present political direction in Belarus, distinguished by strong administrative, centralised control and lack of democracy and transparency, will remain unchanged for the foreseeable future.

The primary aim of Swedish development cooperation should therefore be to strengthen people's awareness of their rights and their ability to invoke them, thus creating conditions conducive to future democratic development and a modern society based on the rule of law. Efforts should focus on making it possible for Belarusian citizens and organisations to establish the broadest possible contact and relations with the outside world, primarily Sweden and the European Union.

Target groups should be broadly defined. Priority should be given to democratic political forces, students and academics, administrative officials, actors in the business sector, people active in cultural affairs and the media, and non-governmental organisations. Young people form an especially important group, one which can be expected to drive social development and bring about change in the future. A restrictive approach should be taken to direct cooperation with Belarusian authorities. Contact with the community should primarily take the form of collaborative initiatives involving Belarusian NGOs and private enterprises. The volume of cooperation should be somewhat increased.

2. Necessary basis

In recent years, political power in Belarus has been concentrated increasingly in the hands of the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko. As in Soviet Union times, the president and his staff control most of what is taking place in the political and economic sphere in present-day Belarus. The presidential election in the spring of 2006 clearly exposed major deficiencies in terms of democracy and respect for human rights. According to international observers, the election was marked by harassment of opposition candidates and supporters, limited media access for opposition parties and widespread election abuses. Moreover, a number of opposition supporters lost their jobs or places at universities after the election. The regime has since tightened its control over civil society and the few independent mass media outlets still in operation are reduced to working under very difficult conditions.

Despite the lack of democracy, the regime enjoys considerable popularity among large groups of the population. This is mainly because under Lukashenko Belarus has escaped many of the economic and social hardships experienced by its neighbours, largely thanks to extensive subsidies from Russia and the temperate pace of economic reform.

The Belarusian economy has been posting positive figures. GDP has risen by an average of seven per cent per year over the last 10 years. People have benefited from this increase in the form of higher wages and a relatively well developed social safety net. Real wages have doubled over the last seven years and four out of five Belarusian citizens draw a welfare benefit or subsidy of some kind. Inflation over the last 10 years has been somewhat higher than for the region as a whole. Unemployment and the foreign debt are both low.

Economic growth is driven by expansionist economic policies made possible by oil and gas subsidies from Russia. Oil is bought cheaply, refined in Belarus and sold on the world market at a high price, while cheaper gas has been used for domestic consumption and the manufacture of goods such as artificial fertiliser for export. However, there is a danger that economic growth could fall off from 2007 on, partly in reaction to the doubling of the price of gas exported to Belarus at the end of 2006 and partly in response to Russia's announcement that it will raise gas prices to market levels in 2011. The upshot for Belarus would be close on a fourfold price increase, with immediate consequences for the country's economic development. In spite of the difficult economic climate, the private sector is growing and now accounts for 25 per cent of the country's GDP, according to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). However, the financial sector is still poorly developed with limited access to risk capital and loans for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Although the percentage of poor people has fallen from 40 per cent in 1997 to 13 per cent in 2005 according to World Bank estimates, not all poverty indicators are favourable. In the past few years, for example, life expectancy among men has fallen from 67 to 62.7 years. The number of people living with HIV/AIDS is rising rapidly. There are also pronounced regional disparities in terms of economic development, particularly between town and countryside. Households in rural areas are generally poorer. Thirty-six per cent more women than men are unemployed. In the political sphere, the majority of low-level elected representatives are women while only one government minister is a woman.

Many people in Belarus lack basic political rights. The period immediately before the 2006 presidential election saw the passage of a number of new laws aimed at restricting the ability of civil society and independent media outlets to function. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed. Under a new law, anyone portraying the president or the country in a bad light may be punished by up to two years' imprisonment. The independent press not only has difficulty printing its newspapers inside the country; it is also denied access to common distribution channels. As a result, access by citizens to information that is not state controlled is limited. NGOs wishing to operate in Belarus are required to apply for operating permits and to register their activities. They must also be approved as organisations. Organisations involved in international cooperation, or which receive international funding, are treated more restrictively than others. In addition, international funding may be taxed by as much as 60 per cent of the amount received. It is illegal to undertake unregistered activities or to fail to disclose funding. The law governing the registration of activities is vague, leaving considerable room for arbitrary interpretation. Although religious freedom is provided for in the constitution, religious communities have reported difficulties. These include mandatory registration for the hiring or purchasing of premises, which is not always approved. Belarus' religion law, adopted in 2002, gives the state powers to control religious organisations and, to a certain extent, censor religious literature. Foreign citizens are prohibited from heading religious organisations and representatives of foreign religious communities require a special permit from the Committee on Religion and Nationality Affairs to visit the country.

3. Other donors

Although a number of donors are active in Belarus, programmes are limited owing to the political situation and an increasingly complex and uncertain administrative environment.

EU countries follow a restrictive policy with regard to political contact with Belarus and have implemented a special visa regime. In 1997, the European Council criticised the constitutional and political situation and censured continuing violations of human rights in Belarus. It called upon member states to freeze all technical assistance programmes, with the exception of humanitarian projects, regional projects and projects directly supporting the democratisation process. Sweden, one of the biggest bilateral donors, has applied a relatively wide interpretation of permissible funding on the grounds that isolation of Belarus is not in interests of the population.

The EU programme, Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (Tacis) has experienced significant problems. Many projects have become bogged down in the administrative process. The EU has partly reprogrammed support in favour of democracy-related initiatives mainly involving target groups such as civil society, students and independent mass media outlets. The EU Commission holds regular coordination meetings with bilateral donors and other Belarus stakeholders.

As of 2007, Tacis and a number of other programmes will be replaced by the new European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). Its two principal objectives will be to promote economic integration and intensified political cooperation with EU neighbours, and to encourage development in regions adjoining the enlarged Union's eastern and southern borders. This will provide opportunities for wider contact between Belarus and countries such as Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

The failure to implement structural economic reform has precluded broad support from the World Bank. However, the World Bank is preparing a new strategy for Belarus for the period 2007–2010. The bank is currently servicing an active loan of USD 22.6 million for a social infrastructure project – mainly aimed at enhancing energy effectiveness – and is preparing to extend a further loan of USD 50 million for Chernobyl-related projects. In addition, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) has a USD 70 million portfolio of investments in the financial market and food industry. The IFC is also implementing a Sida-financed project aimed at supporting small enterprises.

In 2001, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Belarus struck a half-year, loan-free monitoring programme agreement. The IMF considered that Belarus was strong in terms of monetary policy but weak with respect to budget, tax and structural reform issues. Discussions on renewal of a stand-by arrangement were unsuccessful, and in 2004 the Government withdrew its request for additional financing. However, the country has received extensive technical assistance and training in the monetary and finance policy spheres, statistics and legislation against money laundering.

By the beginning of 2005, the ERBD had approved investment projects worth just under EUR 200 million. The bank's new strategy for Belarus is expected to retain its former policy of only financing projects involving non-state controlled actors or enterprises, while stepping up investment in microenterprises and SMEs.

An extensive programme for Belarus administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is addressing a wide range of concerns, including democratic governance, the environment and energy effectiveness, gender equality, Chernobyl-related rebuilding projects and certain cross-border issues, primarily related to human trafficking. Other organisations active in the country are Unicef, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The USA, with a programme aimed mainly at promoting democracy and human rights, remains the biggest bilateral donor. Germany, previously a major donor, has now cut back its government-funded programme. However, a major, privately funded programme continues to extend support to NGOs. The Netherlands and Denmark have a certain number projects under way in Belarus, mainly aimed at democratisation and providing support to NGOs. In recent years, Poland and Lithuania have developed programmes in Belarus, extending support to civil society, media and student programmes. Switzerland has chosen to limit its contribution to humanitarian support, mainly related to Chernobyl.

Although there is some degree of donor coordination on the ground in Minsk under UNDP auspices, and coordination among informal networks outside Belarus does take place, mechanisms for more systematic coordination of initiatives and strategies are lacking.

4. Development cooperation in 2002–2005 – conclusions

Swedish bilateral assistance to Belarus for the period 2002–2005 totalled SEK 138 million. In 2006, approximately SEK 40 million was committed to bilateral cooperation projects. The aim of cooperation was to support the modernisation and democratisation of Belarus society

and pave the way for future reform. Establishing closer ties with Sweden and the EU was also an important objective. Cooperation focused mainly on deeper democratisation, economic change and social security.

Projects and programmes were largely successful in terms of promoting knowledge and awareness of human rights and democratic values. This was achieved through exchanges of experience across a broad spectrum with Sweden and other countries. Although cooperation encompassed several sectors and involved or affected different population groups, its impact was limited in terms of bringing about real change at policy level.

Initiatives in the main area of cooperation, i.e. deeper democratisation, involved support to civil society, the mass media, local self-government, gender equality and exchanges on a limited scale in the administrative sphere. A number of Swedish NGOs undertook activities aimed at promoting greater democratisation in collaboration with Belarusian partner organisations. Many Swedish political parties also had extensive contact and close cooperation with opposition parties and organisations in Belarus. A large number of people were thus able to benefit directly from exchanges of experience and knowledge transfer. However, these activities had no significant effect on reform processes as the Government's policy during the period was moving towards greater administrative, more centralised control.

In the second largest area of cooperation, economic change, Swedish support was mainly focused on developing the small enterprise sector and on land and real estate management, with the aim of establishing a viable property market. Projects delivered through the IFC and the EBRD Turn Around Management programme were instrumental in the introduction of simpler administrative and licensing procedures for small entrepreneurs and contributed to stronger enterprises. However, the investment and business climate remains unfavourable and it is difficult to assess the long-term effect of the results achieved. Real estate properties were registered under a new, modern land and real estate registration system, although no progress was made with regard to the privatisation or development of the property market.

Initiatives in the social sector focused on extending support to orphaned children, children in institutions, young people and drug problems, and measures against trafficking. Activities in this sector were designed to complement national programmes, an approach which helped to achieve favourable results. A gradual change in attitudes, with the focus on the individual, can be discerned. Among other achievements, the initiatives contributed to the recognition that social welfare policy must incorporate a children's rights perspective. In practice, this has led to the development of alternative forms of care aimed at reducing the number of children placed in institutions. With regard to human trafficking, support was focused on improving measures to help trafficking victims and on promoting more effective, rights-based legal treatment through training programmes for the police and prosecution service.

Cooperation with non-state actors became increasingly complicated during the strategy period due to growing administrative regulation. Registering projects became increasingly difficult and time consuming.

The activities of the Swedish Institute (SI) contributed substantially to democratisation efforts. The period was marked by a growing interest in cooperation in education and research on the part of Swedish seats of learning and their Belarusian counterparts. Cooperation is currently hampered to some extent by a lack of English language skills, but above all by difficulty in obtaining approval to travel from Belarus. To expedite the process, SI and a

number of Swedish university faculties have entered into agreements with their Belarusian counterparts.

5. General considerations

The purpose of all previous Swedish cooperation with Belarus has been to support the democratisation and modernisation of Belarusian society. Cooperation has focused on measures aimed at raising awareness and creating points of contact across a broad front in an effort to end the country's isolation and help pave the way for future reform. Initial efforts to promote institutional development and systemic change have been made in areas where conditions for reform under the current regime were deemed to be present. In most cases, these effect measures has proved to be limited in terms of achieving real change.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the present political direction in Belarus, distinguished by strong administrative, centralised control and lack of democracy and transparency, will remain unchanged for the foreseeable future. The president and the regime enjoy considerable popularity, which, combined with an ostensibly strong economy and a repressed and partly divided opposition, make democratic and market economic reforms less likely in the short term. However, there is growing awareness among the country's rulers that the economy is vulnerable due among other factors to its strong dependence on Russian subsidies, a shrinking export base and a lagging private sector. At best, this awareness could open the way for a measure of economic reform and greater mobilisation of the private sector.

Swedish development cooperation should therefore seek to strengthen people's awareness of their rights and their ability to invoke them, in order to create conditions conducive to future democratic development and a modern society based on the rule of law. Efforts should focus on making it possible for Belarusian citizens and organisations to establish the broadest possible contact points and relations with the outside world, particularly the EU. Initiatives should aim to contribute to the development of instruments and approaches that create forums and encourage exchanges rather than extend support for more complex development projects aimed at institutional reform. This approach will also reduce the relevance of sectoral considerations. Although areas where Sweden has a comparative advantage, sought-after experience and a well developed contact network – and has achieved good results in the past – are especially appropriate, the prospects for further broadening contact interfaces in administratively feasible ways should be explored. Collaboration with neighbours such as Poland and Lithuania may prove cost effective in the case of certain programmes.

The target groups for Swedish assistance should be broadly defined. Priority should be given to democratic political forces, students and academics, administrative officials, actors in the business sector (especially SMEs), people active in cultural affairs and the media, and NGOs. Young people form an especially important group, which can reasonably be expected to drive social development and bring about change in the future. Direct cooperation with Belarusian authorities should be restrictive in scope and as far as possible undertaken with the participation of Belarusian NGOs.

At present, conditions favourable to the implementation of large, complex reform programmes are lacking. However, exceptions may be found in a few areas where the regime has demonstrated a clear desire for change. In such cases, limited project initiatives, even involving a measure of institutional support, may be worth considering.

Swedish initiatives should be closely coordinated with the activities of other donors and cost-effective solutions should be sought. For example, it may be advantageous to channel support through other donors in cases where these are better qualified or equipped to operate in a generally difficult environment. Such donors include state actors such as the EU Commission, international financial institutions and other bilateral donors, and private actors. As a major donor in Belarus, Sweden should play an active part in donor coordination work.

6. Goals, orientation and areas of activity

The overall objective of Swedish development cooperation is to help create conditions that will enable the poor to improve their lives. Working to helping Belarus take a more substantial part in European cooperation and become a more open society with more democratic and stronger market economy values would appear to be the most effective way of combating the various dimensions of poverty over time, and otherwise improve living conditions for the population.

The goal of Swedish development cooperation initiatives in Belarus is to help move development towards a democratic and market economy-based society and promote closer ties with the EU and Sweden.

Given currently prevailing conditions, cooperation should be concentrated on projects aimed at generating information, knowledge and wider contact, exchange programmes and awareness raising measures. Apart from those directly linked to the current government leaders, such projects should be amenable to implementation at a number of levels. All development cooperation is to be informed by a gender equality perspective.

In order to make full use of adjoining EU member states' knowledge and commitment to development goals, Sida is to actively promote tripartite cooperation. Efforts should accordingly be made to explore opportunities for cooperation with Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

In 2006, disbursements amounted to SEK 40 million. An increase in volume to SEK 70 million per year during the strategy period should be feasible, *inter alia* through funding increases in the business, cultural, educational, research and environmental sectors. However, this will presuppose the efficient and effective use of assistance, and provision for funding under regional appropriations.

Initiatives are mainly anticipated in the areas below. Their scope and direction in each area will depend on how strongly these are controlled and regulated by the regime.

Sweden should be prepared to rapidly initiate a fully developed cooperation programme with the Belarusian political leadership in the event of a change in the country's democratic orientation.

Democracy, civil society, human rights, media and information

The goal of cooperation in this area is a vital, pluralistic civil society in which citizens can take an increasingly active part in political life and have access to independent media outlets.

This is to be achieved by:

- exposing Belarusian actors in the public administration, civil society and independent trade unions to the democratic and market economy values prevailing in Sweden and the EU
- promoting the operation of civil society
- promoting citizen participation in political life, and
- strengthening independent media outlets.

It is essential to support the growth of a vital, democratic civil society and its organisations. Cooperation between organisations in civil society should be supported and their work facilitated in various ways in the difficult and exposed situation they are facing. Gender concerns should be emphasised and support should be extended to certain gender equality-targeted projects. Due attention should also be given to the situation of religious communities. In addition, efforts to encourage popular participation in political life should be given high priority. This support is mainly channelled through organisations affiliated to Swedish political parties, with Belarus as a major recipient.

Initiatives on behalf of independent media and access to independent information are important areas in a country where the media sector and information channels are tightly controlled by the state. It should be feasible to extend support to include new ways of working (e.g. using the internet) and satellite TV and radio broadcasts. Cooperation with other countries including Belarus' neighbours, e.g. Poland and Lithuania, should be considered in this connection.

Culture, education and research

The goal of cooperation in this area is intensified contact and exchanges in the cultural sphere with a view to promoting greater awareness, understanding and discussion of democratic culture, and encouraging active citizen participation.

This is to be achieved by:

- exposing Belarusian citizens engaged in cultural, educational and research activities to the democratic and market economy values prevailing in the EU and Sweden
- strengthening the ability of expelled and persecuted students to continue their studies, and
- promoting an independent Belarusian educational system.

Greater prominence should be given to cooperation and exchanges in the cultural and social sphere as a way of creating greater awareness, understanding and discussion of democratic culture, promoting a democratic culture and democratic structures, and encouraging active citizen participation. There are actors in the cultural sphere with the potential to contribute to social change.

Academic exchanges and student programme, that also support expelled students who are obliged to continue their studies abroad remain important elements. The possibility of international cooperation within such programmes should be examined. Swedish initiatives based on exchanges and outreach activities in the educational sector, e.g. through the Visby Programme and the Polish-Swedish Solidarity Fund for Belarus should open the way for broader exchanges.

The private business sector

The goal of cooperation in this area is a better, more predictable business climate and a stronger private sector.

This is to be achieved by:

- exposing entrepreneurs to the market economy values prevailing in the EU and Sweden
- implementing measures aimed at bringing about a more favourable and more predictable business climate, and
- enhancing the ability of entrepreneurs to act as a cohesive social group.

The private sector – primarily SMEs – is one of the principal forces capable of driving change towards a more open market economy and transparency in Belarus. It is expected to play a crucial role in the structural transformation of the economy which Belarus will eventually have to undergo. Measures to support a more favourable and more predictable business climate are not only central to economic development but are also a vital means of strengthening the private sector as a force for change in society. Entrepreneurs are an important social group and can be expected to push vigorously for the modernisation of Belarus. The Swedish Fund for Industrial Cooperation with Developing Countries (Swedfund) should promote efforts to increase the presence of Swedish enterprises in the Belarusian business sector. Projects aimed at developing the Belarusian financial sector should also be undertaken and consideration should accordingly be given to the possibility of collaboration with international financial institutions. Consideration could also be given to exchanges of experience with Sweden and Belarus' neighbours aimed at studying the regulation and promotion of the private sector there. The same applies to academic exchanges. Support to industry/trade organisations, chambers of commerce, etc. at both regional and central level should be considered.

The environment

The goal of cooperation in this area is greater awareness of and commitment to environmental protection, enhanced environmental information and monitoring.

This is to be achieved by:

- assisting environmental organisations and promoting democratic discussion of environmental problems, and
- working for the fulfilment of international conventions and strategies, and promoting environmental cooperation with the EU and countries on the Baltic seaboard.

Cooperation on the environment has hitherto been limited to a few smaller cooperation projects, mainly concerned with transboundary water issues. Intensified cooperation should be feasible during the strategy period.

Efforts to boost environmental awareness and commitment, more effective environmental legislation, information and monitoring, further professional training in the environmental sphere, development of local Agenda 21 programmes for sustainable development and measures to improve civil radiation protection are all potential objects of support during the period. Local environmental organisations are important stakeholders in public discussions on environmental issues and should be supported in this role and as a force for democracy.

Support for Belarusian participation in regional and global programmes such as the Baltic Action Programme, the Kyoto Protocol and emission trading may also become relevant. Initiatives aimed at cutting down pollution from pesticides, particularly if they contribute to reducing the environmental burden on the Baltic Sea, may be considered, along with waste-related issues.

Social services and healthcare

The goal of cooperation in this area is to strengthen the rights of the individual in the social sphere and healthcare sector, and to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

This is to be achieved by:

- strengthening individual and children's rights and family responsibility, and
- promoting exchange and dialogue between Swedish and Belarusian parties in the healthcare sector.

Swedish support in the social sphere has been successful in placing individual rights in focus as opposed to the centralised and bureaucratised model currently in effect in Belarus. The social services have begun to adopt a new approach in which responsibility is vested in the family and the focus is on the individual. Initiatives should take as their point of departure the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. Of continued importance are initiatives aimed at combating human trafficking.

Increased scope for exchange projects in the healthcare sector during the strategy period is likely. Consideration may also be given to participation in the primary healthcare project in Belarus. The project's objective is more effective delivery of health and medical care services to the poorer segments of the population. HIV/AIDS is a priority area in its own right and support aimed at helping to reduce the spread of a disease in danger of assuming epidemic proportions should be given – preferably in cooperation with other donors. Efforts in this area should be informed by a gender equality perspective. The possibility of cooperation in other healthcare sectors may also arise.

7. Other policy areas and Swedish relations

Contact with the business sector in Belarus is very limited and the volume of bilateral trade is modest. Swedish exports to Belarus are somewhat larger than imports. In 2005, exports totalled just over SEK 450 million, while imports amounted to just over SEK 340 million. Swedish exports to Belarus largely consist of engineering products, principally machinery, appliances and telecom equipment. Principal imports from Belarus include lignite and peat, timber, iron and steel and chemical products. So far, Swedfund has not succeeded in identifying any investment opportunities in Belarus.

As a participant in the so-called Söderköping Process, an initiative aimed at facilitating cross-border cooperation on asylum, migration and border management issues, Belarus takes part in all project meetings, workshops and senior level review meetings.

8. Dialogue issues

Strategy implementation is predicated on dialogue with numerous actors and at many levels of Belarusian society. Democracy and the rights perspective are the main subjects of discussion.

9. Implementation and follow-up

The strategy is defined in greater detail by Sida in its yearly country plans, in the form of projects and programmes. The strategy and the country plans are followed up in yearly and half-yearly reports which provide the basis for consultative meetings between the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Sida. Sida is required to draw up yearly and half-yearly reports on progress assessments made by the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the EU and the World Bank in the spheres of democracy, human rights and market economy reform. These reports must also indicate the extent to which Swedish initiatives have contributed to progress achieved.

Projects and programmes are required to follow up and evaluate their activities and indicators against stated project and programme goals. This then provides the basis for follow-ups on interim targets for the various strategy areas, which are summarised in half-yearly and yearly reports. A full account and assessment of the results achieved during the strategy period is presented before commencement of the next strategy.



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