



Slovenian Paneuropean
Movement

JOINT CITIZENS FORCES – COMMON EUROPEAN FUTURE



In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas.

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RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU: EVIDENCE FOR A PREVENTIVE- DIVERSIONARY THEORY?

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I review competing explanations for Russia's annexation of Crimea, and find that the most convincing is a variant of diversionary theory. Official statements of the Russian leaders and data on Russian perceptions of the European Union suggest that the process of European enlargement toward Eastern Europe has worried the Russian leadership, which was apprehensive about losing domestic legitimacy if wealthy, liberal-democratic countries were established close to its borders. Both Russia's 2008 war against Georgia and its annexation of Crimea in 2014 can be seen as an attempt to prevent these countries from becoming part of the Western liberal system.

This has serious implications for European foreign and security policy. If offensive realists, like John Mearsheimer (2014), are right that Russian behavior is caused by the threat posed by NATO expansion, then improving relations with Russia would require, first and foremost, to give Russia security guarantees. If, however, the problem is not NATO, but the EU, and the "threat" is not military, but one related to liberal-democratic values undermining the legitimacy of the Russian leadership, then addressing it by offering security guarantees is unlikely to be a key move for ameliorating the relations between Russia and the West.

RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARD UKRAINE: COMPETING EXPLANATIONS

In this section, I review competing explanations for Russia's annexation of Crimea: 1) realist explanations, according to which Russia's behavior is a defensive response to the threat of NATO's expansion; 2) a rationalist explanation based on the bargaining model of war; 3) ideological explanations, predicated on the assumption that Russian leaders are not rational and self-interested, but rather under the sway of a conservative-imperial ideology; 4) diversionary explanations, stressing the need, for the Russian leadership, to cement their domestic standing by preventing the Eastward enlargement of the European Union.

REALIST EXPLANATIONS

Many scholars, mostly realists, have argued that NATO expansion would pose a security threat to Russia. Even before the Ukraine conflict, John F. Kennan (a classical realist) described NATO expansion as a "the beginning of a new Cold War," a "tragic mistake" "that would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves" (quoted in Friedman, 1998; cf. Danner, Kennan, Talbott, and Hamilton, 1998). Despite democratic-peace theory is often framed as an alternative to realist thinking, prominent democratic-peace scholars shared this concern and predicted that NATO expansion could bring about either an isolated and hostile Russia or, in a much dangerous, but also more likely scenario, a China-Russia alliance against the US (Russett and Stam, 1998: 362).

Even Kenneth Waltz, the father of structural realism, predicted that NATO expansion would alienate Russia from the US and facilitate Sino-Russian cooperation (Waltz, 2000: 31).

After the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, John J. Mearsheimer (2014) has argued that "the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault" and sought to interpret the conflict through the lenses of his theory, offensive realism. His arguments go as follows: great powers have offensive capabilities and, in anarchy, are insecure about each other's intentions. They are particularly jealous of the area near their territory and fearful that other great powers intrude into their region. In this light, Russia's behavior is seen as a defensive response to the "threat" posed by NATO's Eastward expansion.

This line of argument has both strong points and weaknesses. There is ample evidence that the Russian leadership was upset by NATO expansion: Putin's well-known Munich speech is an example. However, Mearsheimer (2014) seems to think that today's great powers are afraid of military invasion, or of attacks to their territories. He notes that Napoleonic France's, Imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany crossed Ukraine to attack Russia and suggests that the situation today is pretty much the same, with Russia wanting to preserve Ukraine as a buffer state for strategic reasons. But as James Fearon (2014) has noted in a polemic with Mearsheimer and his reading of the Ukraine crisis, it is doubtful that XXI-Century, nuclear-armed states are scared of large-scale military invasion. So it is possible and even probable that the Russian leadership was irked by NATO expansion, but Mearsheimer, with his misleading comparisons with Napoleonic France and other precedents, does a poor job at explaining why this is so.

RATIONALIST EXPLANATION

One alternative, then, is that Russian leaders were worried by the possibility that NATO expansion gave the US more leverage during a crisis. The terms of the settlement during a crisis are influenced by states' estimates of the probability of victory in a total war, as well as by their estimates of the costs of war (see, among others: Fearon, 1995; Wagner, 2007, 137-154). NATO Eastward expansion and weapons deployments have arguably changed the likely outcome and costs of a total war, and thus weakened the Russian bargaining position in any future crisis, and, even worse, in a series of future crises. If Putin and the Russian leadership understood this, then, perhaps, they have decided to try to halt NATO expansion not out of fear of being military invaded (an implausible scenario in the XXI Century), but to safeguard their bargaining power. So Mearsheimer (2014) is right that NATO expansions upset the Russians, but his emphasis on offensive weapons and uncertainty over others' intentions is hardly a compelling explanation for why this is so. Fearon (2014), in turn, is right that Russia does not need to fear being "invaded by tanks from another great power", but he nowhere this implies that NATO expansion played no role in explaining the Russian decision to annex Crimea and to support separatists in the Donbass region.

Like the realist explanations, even the bargaining or rationalist explanation has both strong points and weak points. Differently from Mearsheimer's, the rationalist explanation is logically sound. As for the weak points, there is little evidence that people in the Russian military, or Putin himself, reason like game theorists and anticipated that NATO expansion could affect the likely outcome of a possible, future crisis between Russia and the US. Only wading through the Russian archives can tell whether this is so, which means that the rationalist story will remain, for some years to come, an unproved conjecture.

IDEOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

Perhaps, neither a realist nor a rationalist account adequately explain the Russian decision-making. Some see Putin as an ideologue, not a rational, self-interested actor. His actions toward Ukraine and his decision to annex Crimea are thus accounted for by his ideology and the ideology of his inner circle:

As with most academic realist analysis, [Mearsheimer's] is nonsense. Putin is not driven by cold calculations of rational self-interest, because no human is.[...] Putin believes hegemony over Russia's near-abroad is necessary for Russian security because of his beliefs about Russian nationhood and historical destiny. Putin (and, perhaps more so, his inner circle) [...] appears to be driven by peculiar form of Russian nationalism infused with religion, destiny, and messianism (Miller, 2016).

Again, this explanation has both strengths and weaknesses. There is abundant evidence that Russian foreign policy is influenced by ideological considerations. Putin's regime has strong ties with the Orthodox Church (Anderson, 2016), and Putin is alleged to have been influenced by thinkers such as Alexandr Dugin and Vladislav Surkov. His speeches and interviews often cast Western materialism against Russian spirituality. United Russia's official ideology is "Russian Conservatism", based on Russia's "history, culture, and spirituality" (White, 2011, 362).

One problem with ideological explanations is that in the Russian narrative not only Crimea, but Ukraine as a whole is seen as sharing a common Slavic-Orthodox cultural heritage with Russia. Granted, Crimea and the Caucasus occupy a special place in Russian imagination (largely due to the writings of such authors as Babel, Lermontov, Pushkin, and L. Tolstoy), but Russian nationalists see modern Russian culture as springing from Kievan Rus' (for historical background, see Pelenski, 1977; Pelenski, 1998; cf. the observation of Wilson, 2000: 33, first par.). One has to wonder why, then, Putin has annexed Crimea and provided support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine, but has shrunk from invading all of Ukraine. A related argument can be made that given the cultural and historical importance of the Caucasus for Russia, it would have been all too natural for Moscow to try to annex Georgia.

Some claim that in the future Putin might pursue more ambitious goals (Dempsey, 2018; Schwartzbaum, 2019).

Perhaps so, but at the moment Russia is pursuing a more limited, negative goal: preventing neighboring countries from becoming integrated with the West and Western institutions. If the Russian leadership were so obsessed with "religion, destiny, and messianism," shouldn't it engage in some true-believer kind of behavior, such as invading the whole of Ukraine?

DIVERSIONARY EXPLANATIONS

Russia's pursuit of a "limited goal", such as preventing Ukraine from becoming integrated with the West, and annexing part of it, but not invading and annexing the whole of Ukraine, may be explained by some variant of the diversionary theory of war. Tobias Theiler has argued that the conflict in Crimea increased national pride among Russians, and he found evidence for this thesis in attitude surveys (Theiler, 2018). This is an application of the traditional version of diversionary theory; it is plausible, but, like in the case of the ideological explanation, it leaves unclear why the Russian leadership has decided to pursue the rather limited goal of preventing neighboring countries (Georgia, Ukraine) from joining the West, without mounting full-scale invasions. If the purpose was to exploit the "rally 'round the flag" effect, and to garner consensus on foreign adventures, why annex Crimea and provide support to separatists in Eastern Ukraine, but not try some bolder move like, say, try to annex Georgia and the whole of Ukraine? Moreover, Fearon (2014) noted that Putin's popularity was not in decline when he decided to annex Crimea, which means that the surge in Russian national pride may be a side-effect, but not necessarily the ex-ante reason for the annexation.

Another, less developed variant of this argument blends preventive-war arguments and diversionary theory. This approach has been somehow neglected by the literature, and consequently it's under-theorized. To the best of my knowledge, the first formulation of what can be called a preventive-diversionary theory can be found in the work of Marie Mendras:

Moscow has perceived the democratization of its former vassal states as a real danger [...]. If Ukraine, Georgia, Moldavia and Belarus simultaneously worked toward the consolidation of constitutional states and were preparing to join Europe [...] Putin's regime would find itself besieged, because the considerable gap between political systems would destroy the legitimacy and authority of the Russian regime (Mendras, 2012: 265; cf. Mendras, 2012: 200).

Mendras does not say that Putin's foreign interventions are a by-product of him fearing that democratic states along the Russian borders would delegitimize its authoritarian rule, but the point is implicit in her analysis. In answering a question about what has driven Putin's actions in Ukraine, James D. Fearon has reached conclusions very similar to Mendras':

Putin has [...] acted in ways to suggest that he's very worried about a large-scale domestic mobilization against him and his regime. What's probably freaking him out is that he genuinely thinks the US in particular wants to put in place a regime in Kiev that would be, from his perspective, a dangerous demonstration - the kind of thing that happened to Yanukovich is the kind of thing he doesn't want to see happen to himself (Fearon, 2014).

The causal mechanism that Mendras and Fearon refer to can be generalized as follows. The system that we live in is what Aron would call a «heterogeneous system», one «in which the states are organized according to different principles and appeal to contradictory values» (Aron, 1961: 100). If a state is organized according to an authoritarian principle and appeals to authoritarian values, it will find it dangerous to have democratic countries thrive near its borders, not necessarily out of fear of military invasion, which is less of an issue in the nuclear age, but because democratic neighbors may embolden the country's domestic opposition, or trigger large-scale migrations from the authoritarian to the democratic countries. This may lead an authoritarian state to target neighbors countries which undergoing democratization, or are on the verge of joining a community of democratic nations.

Traditional diversionary theory maintains that when their domestic standing is precarious, leaders in one country may attack another country to shore up consensus for their rule. And Fearon (2014) noted that "it's not as if Putin was in big domestic trouble at the start of [...the conflict over Ukraine]", a fact that, as already noted, poses a problem for the traditional version of diversionary theory.

But the modified version of diversionary theory which I sketched out (based on Fearon's own observations, as well on Mendras') maintains that a country's democratization, its joining a free-market area, or a super-national community of democratic states, may threaten the popularity of leaders in another, more authoritarian country in the future.

The authoritarian leaders anticipate that their domestic standing will be weakened by democratic regime change in another country, and act preventively by attacking the latter country to prevent democratization. This may be called a preventive-diversionary dynamic, and solve the problem of why a ruler may decide to attack even at a moment when its domestic standing is not particularly brittle.

EVIDENCE FOR A PREVENTIVE-DIVERSIONARY THEORY

In the previous section, I reviewed several theories that explain the Russian annexation of Crimea. While all have some merits, all have problems, too. Although it was not explicitly formulated as an explanation or a theory, I have relied on the writings of Marie Mendras and James Fearon to sketch out the traits of what I call preventive-diversionary theory.

According to this theory, what upset the Russian leadership is not so much the threat that Ukraine could join NATO, but rather the threat that a truly democratic and wealthy Ukraine could pose to the legitimacy of the Russian leadership. In this reading, the threat came less from NATO and more from the European Union, and was not a present threat, but a future one. Now, I set forth to demonstrate that there is some evidence which makes this explanation preliminary plausible. To do so, I will focus on the concept of sovereign democracy and the Russian Foreign Agent Law, on the one hand; and the Russian perception of the European Union, on the other.

SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY AND THE "FOREIGN AGENT LAW"

The notion of "sovereign democracy" and Putin's own public statements on the matter seem broadly consistent with the logic of preventive-diversionary theory. Vladislav Surkov has defined sovereign democracy as:

[...A] mode of the political life of society in which the state authorities, their bodies and actions are elected, formed, and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all its unity and diversity for the sake of achieving material well-being, freedom, and justice for all the citizens, social groups, and peoples that constitute it (Surkov, 2009: 9)

Note how this definition postulates the existence of a Russian nation which purportedly acts as a single entity ("in its unity and diversity"), and whose citizens, groups and people are seemingly bearers of common interests. It's typical of populism to define "the people" as one cohesive entity, whose interests the populist leaders claim to understand and to serve. Also note the complete lack of any references (in the definition as well as in the rest of Surkov's article) to separation of powers, the institutional independence of the judiciary, checks and balances, open and competitive elections, and minority rights. Surkov (2009: 10) uses the fact that democratic regimes come in a variety of different forms (e.g., pluralistic vs. majoritarian democracy; the fact that in the past democratic countries restricted the rights of women and minority) to blur the difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes and to hide the fact that Russia is increasingly becoming less democratic.

Putin's own statements on the matter, and even his rhetorical strategies, echo Surkov's. When foreign journalists shared concern about the Russian electoral system being not democratic, Putin replied that it's hard to tell what democracy is, but seemed inclined to consider direct democracy as the sole authentic form of democracy. Yet, he observed, direct democracy is impossible in a huge, multi-ethnic, and multinational state such as Russia. Different countries, he concluded, adopt different electoral systems, and it's hard to say whether a system is more democratic than another. After this attempt to evade the question posed by foreign correspondents, Putin concluded that "[...W]e categorically oppose the use of all levers, including arguments on the need for us to democratise our society, in order to intervene in our internal affairs" (Putin, 2006).

The Russian "Law on Non-Commercial Organizations," better known as Foreign Agent Law, has put this concept into practice. According to it, any organizations that are recipients of funds from abroad (any amount), and engage in "political activities" (broadly defined) are requested to register as foreign agents and to submit to stringent requirements. The law has had a dramatic negative impact on ONG operating in Russia (see Flikke, 2016). In late 2017, the law was extended to media outlets. Russia's slide toward authoritarianism requires to hush up information and views that contradict the prevailing narrative of Russian media. A Giles (2016: 30) noted: "It is easy for Russian media to provide accounts or translations of statements by foreign leaders or organizations which are misleading or entirely false, without being challenged within the country". The foreign-agent law, and its application to Russian media, contribute to preserving this state of affairs.

Together, the elaboration of the concept of a sovereign democracy, Putin's susceptibility to foreign concerns that Russia is no longer a democratic country, and his attempt to shield the Russian public from alternative views and opinions suggest that the spread of democratic countries near Russia's borders would be seen as a "threat" by the Russian leadership. The evidence is indirect, though, partly because no Russian leader would openly admit that the Russian regime might be undermined by democratic values and institutions.

RUSSIAN PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Russian public came to see the European Union in increasingly positive terms during the early 2000s. According to the polls, in 2000 a total of 21% Russians gave a very positive or rather positive assessment of the European Union; in 2005, the number rose to 49%. Those who gave either a very negative or a rather negative assessment remained the same (11%). Those who were strongly in favor or somewhat in favor of Russia joining the EU were 47% in 2000, a number that rose to 56% in 2005. Those who were strongly against or somewhat against were 11% in 2000, and 19% in 2005 (White, 2006: 138).

Yet the process of European enlargement was accompanied by uneasiness by the Russian elite, a feeling which is evident in a number of remarks. In March 2009, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asked "whether [the European Neighborhood Policy] is not intended to derail [former Soviet] countries from the course which they should be able to choose freely" (quoted in Gretskiy et al, 2014, p. 379). As Gretskiy et al. (2014: 380) conclude "[...]o the assessments of most Russian officials and experts, the ENP had implemented the desire of the EU "to sanitarily cordon itself off from Russia." Put it simply, many in Russian elite saw the Eastward expansion of the EU as an intrusion within the traditional Russian geo-cultural sphere of influence, in an effort to peel countries away from Russia (see the quotes and evaluations in Secrieru, 2010: 16-17).

But this attitude of suspicion and this competitive mindset often betrayed an inferiority complex by Russian policy-makers. As a Russian diplomat once put it: "it is not the all-knowing EU playing God and descending to earth to modernize the savages" (quoted in Secrieru, 2010: 23). This idea that the EU was arrogant in its attempt to impose its moral standards on Russia, as if Russia was backward, was sort of a common motif in Russian diplomatic circles. Vladimir Putin himself began this trend (and others, later, followed him) by comparing the Western attitude toward Russia to "the arguments some western countries used to justify their colonial expansion into Africa and Asia" (Putin, 2006).

The conflict over Ukraine had the effect of aligning the public's perceptions to the elite's. The transmission belt, of course, was the politically-controlled Russian media. As Chaban et al. (2017: 5; cf.: 17) argue, after Maidan, Russian media increasingly came to represent the EU has been "ridden by economic and political crises," which contradicted the previous representation of the EU as wealthy and strong. This, in turn, has generated a shift in the Russian public's view of the EU "as weak and decadent."

According to the polls, in 2012 the total positive assessments amounted to an impressive 62%, while the total negative to a paltry 7%. Yet in 2015 the total positive had dropped to 23%, while the total negative had surged to 40% (Chaban et al, 2017: 13). A similar trend can be found in polls that break down the assessment of the Russian public into a number of markers. In 2012, respondents described the European Union as modern (roughly 70%), united (60%), likeable (almost 50%), peaceful (slightly above 40%). Yet already in 2012 almost 30% of respondents described it as hypocritical and less than 20% as aggressive.

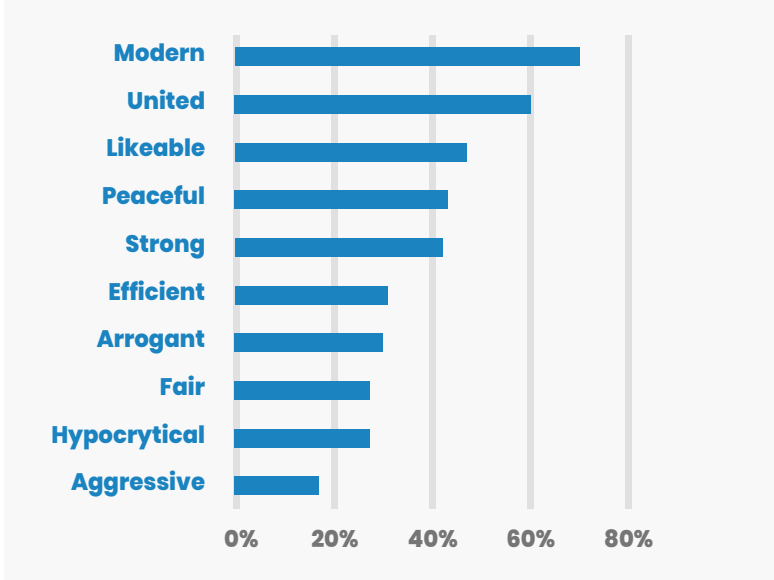


Figure 1. The Russian public's perceptions of the European Union in 2012 (source: Chaban et. al., 2017: 14)

The data reversed after 2014, with almost 50% of the respondents now willing to describe the European Union as hypocritical, almost 40% as arrogant, and very few (less than 10%) willing to describe it as either trustworthy, peaceful, or united.

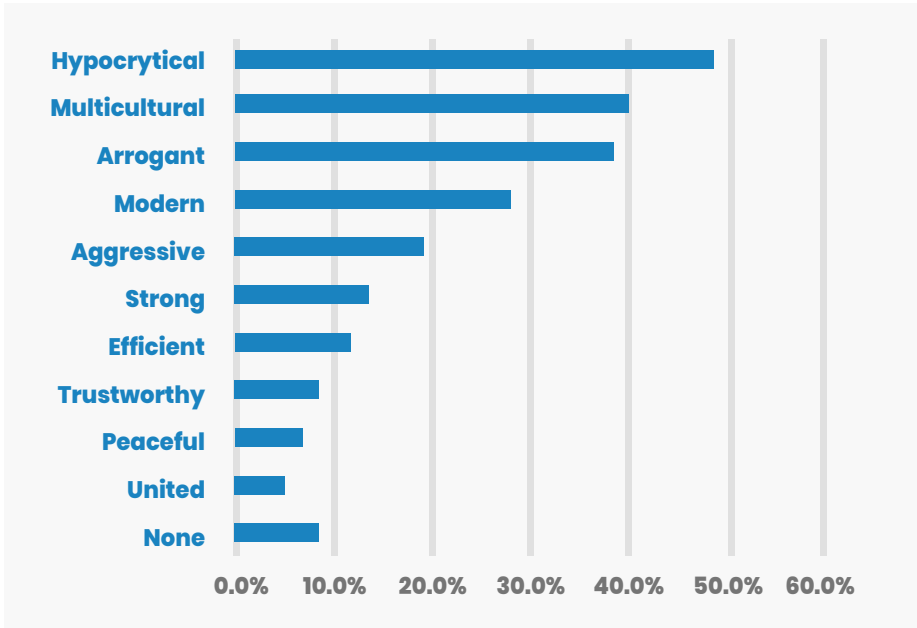


Figure 2. The Russian public's perceptions of the European Union in 2015 (source: Chaban et. al., 2017: 14).

A possible explanation for this trend may be that Europe has imposed economic sanctions on Russia over its annexation of Crimea. Yet as we have seen the data show that Russian leadership's uneasiness about Europe predates the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. Another interpretation seems plausible. At a moment where many, in Ukraine, advocated getting closer to the European Union and farther from Russia, it became necessary, for the Russian leadership, to convince the Russian public that the EU is not an attractive alternative.

Hence the need to portray the EU as divided and politically weak, unable to cope with the growing flow of immigrants, crippled by economic problems and social tensions. The theme of the failure of multiculturalism, both in Europe and in the US, is typically pitted against a positive image of Russia as a strong country, able to assert itself against terrorists and migration flows, and to preserve its unique culture. This narrative suggests that for the Russian leadership having wealthy, successful democratic countries near its borders would pose a major problem.

Again, the evidence is indirect, but it seems at least preliminary plausible that, for the Russian leadership, quashing the democratic aspirations of its neighboring countries was a preventive-diversionary move.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have reviewed competing explanations of Russian behavior toward Ukraine. Although all have merits, I have argued that the most convincing explanation is a preventive-diversionary theory. Authoritarian leaders may try to prevent neighbor countries from democratizing, or from joining a community of democratic states because they perceive that having democracies near their borders would threaten their legitimacy.

During the Cold War many people fled permanently from East to West Germany attracted by the higher standards of living and more tolerant democratic institutions. This was the main reason behind the Berlin crisis of 1958–1961 which culminated with building of the Berlin Wall. And Lerner (2008) has provided evidence that the repression of the Prague Spring was in part related to a perception that the Czechs were becoming fascinated by Western ideas and its market culture. Russian behavior today can be seen, by and large, as the continuation of the same historical trend.

To the degree that NATO's expansion irked the Russian leaders, halting the expansion can serve to improve the relations between Russia, on the one hand, and the EU and the West, on the other. But if the conflict largely hinges (and I submit that it does) on the Russian leadership feeling threatened by European democratic institutions, a military solution can improve the situation only up to a point.

Russian media will arguably continue to represent the EU as a decadent and weak, but also, hypocritical and malevolent actor. Russia's meddling with democratic process and elections in the West will probably continue, too; it's seen as a response to the perceived meddling of Western institutions and NGOs which "threatens" the current Russian leadership. Short of a regime change in Russia, there appears to be no easy solution to improve Europe–Russian relations.

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