SOCIAL CONTEXT OF FORMING NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH EDUCATION IN POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES

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Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR newly independent countries (Commonwealth of Independent Countries (CIS)) embarked on a wide range of reforms aimed at building statehood, transformation from command to market economy, and shifting from communism to liberalism or other types of political doctrines. This transition required the creation of a new concept of national identity. The process of national identity building was accompanied by ethnic conflicts, economic difficulties and social tensions.

Education was at the core of this process. Removal of the colonial legacy in the curriculum, which was heavily affected by Soviet imperialism and communism, and the creation of new statehood were the major tasks of the educators. Educational establishments were assigned to work out a new system to forge national identity and state ideology. These tasks became complex in the result of transition difficulties.

The paper analyzes what tendencies and peculiar features characterize the social context of educational reforms in terms of building national identity. As the national identity concept stands at the core of state ideology its analysis helps to understand the essence of political and social doctrine which the particular government favours.

The paper examines the Soviet legacy and social context of educational system in post-Soviet countries. Further it explores the current political and social context with relations to educational reforms and focuses on building national identity g. The paper outlines that the concept of national identity depends on political leadership and its ideology which is shaped by interests of leaders and elites.

The paper argues that the social contexts of education in post-Soviet countries are characterized by ethnic and social tension. In many instances the policies of leadership have caused and exacerbated social tension which in its turn has negatively affected the context of building national identity.

1. Transition

Education is not only about transfer of knowledge but also the transfer of values. Therefore all states always used the schooling for various political purposes. Educational system exists in the given political, economic and social conditions and is influenced by the needs of the governments and the societies (Rotshtein, 2002). The social context of education refers to various sets of overall political and socio-economic environment in which the education system operates.

The social context of education in post-Soviet countries is highly relevant to the issue of nation building because new states sometimes create statehood from the scratch, forge its identity and strengthen state institutions. Educational system is influenced and interacts between the government demands and the societal environment. It has a very politicized nature in the former Soviet republics due to peculiar circumstances – ethnic conflicts, vibrant political life caused by economic and social uncertainty, mobility of the population, etc.

The role of education in determining national identity is important. It was employed by many states, particularly new ones. Tyack (1966) has stressed its role in forming national character in the US.

For post-Soviet states the task of building national identity was multifaceted – to discard communism, to form new ideology, and to advance statehood and market economy. The dissolution of the Soviet Union necessitated a shift in national identity from communism to ethnocentric one. "Education, especially teaching history, social sciences and humanities (actively used by the Soviet Union to inform national consciousness and mold a personality of a Soviet person), was utilized to shift the Soviet to a new [i]dentity." (Koshmanova, 2006, 107). A new identity building process employed the traditions of Western nation-state combined with traditional values of particular societies.

Aggravated by rising nationalism this state-sanctioned educational policy to redefine and in some cases to create national identity resulted in the increased level of xenophobia and ethnic intolerance. Ethnic intolerance as an element of national identity became a major hurdle in the development of many post-communist countries. "The numerous ethnic conflicts that have occurred in recent years in various regions of the post-Soviet world amply attest to the seriousness of this problem and to the urgent need for teaching interethnic tolerance and acceptance." (Koshmanova, 2006, 106)

Kuzio (2002) argues that the process of nation building in post-Soviet area was similar to other colonial experiences. He tended to blame the Soviet legacy for problems and obstacles arisen during this process. "It is incumbent upon scholars to place post-Soviet "imperial transitions" within the world-wide process of de-colonization that has taken place since the conclusion of World War II." (p.260)

The study of social context of national identity building requires the research of three elements – the Soviet legacy, social environment, and nationalism.

2. The Soviet legacy

The Soviet educational system was highly ideologized and operated under the strict administrative-command system. It was designed to help building of a communist society, controlled by the central authority. The freedom of teachers and students was heavily restricted by the compulsory nature of many components of the educational process (Grant, 1979). Besides promoting communist ideology, the Soviet educational system was designed to eradicate illiteracy among workers and peasants and to serve their social mobility (as the Soviet Union constantly conducted giant construction project across a big country). Their outreach to the working class had positive effects in terms of promoting many of them to higher class. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union was egalitarian society, it still had some stratification – communist elite, intelligentsia, workers and peasants. The Soviet ideology was based on proletariat and therefore it was essential for the authorities to recruit people from the working class for administrative positions. The educational system served this interest quite successfully (Zajda, 1980).

Silova, Johnson and Heyneman (2007) identify some key successes of the Soviet system - a solid infrastructure for educational provision and administration, secularism, ethnic tolerance, and equality. The emphasis was done on equality and interethnic tolerance, and self-sacrifice for the sake of a community. Soviet education helped to promote social cohesion, literacy, and secularism. (Unfortunately, most of these achievements have been significantly undermined since 1991).

Quality of education was also maintained at a good level during the Soviet rule. Zajda (1980a) has stressed that many Soviet educational establishments not only managed to advance their traditions and obtain excellent scientific results equal to any on the world market and training personnel with qualifications up to international standards.

In addition to good performance standards, the Soviets made emphasis on moral upbringing of the pupils and the students. They promoted the dedication to communist ideas, equality, social unity, and high morale. Economic difficulties and senile political leadership undermined the official line, but overall, the Soviet social context in schools was characterized by egalitarism.

On the negative side, the Soviet system lacked freedoms, criticism, and flexibility. It was based on indoctrination, and therefore failed to respond quickly to innovative changes of IT era which began in the 1970s.

Teachers were highly respected in the Soviet schools (Zajda, 1980b; Counts, 1961). The respectable role of teaches, even though commendable, however, was designed to infuse authoritarian tendencies among students. In the meantime, teachers' salaries were sometimes less than skilled working class, which caused in some cases corruption.

As I grew up and went to school during the Soviet Union, I can fully attest the information and opinion of scholars on the Soviet education. I would like to point out three important characteristics. Firstly, the Soviet education was multifaceted and inclusive. It had a high emphasis on humanities which promoted high morale. Secondly, the Soviet education tried equalize social differences which, maybe at lesser extent than in capitalist society, still existed in the Soviet Union. It was successful in treating equally people from elite and working class families. Thirdly, and this is about negative side, the Soviet education did not have room for creativity. Students were barely exposed to implement creative projects in classroom activities. Discussions were rare and routine teaching process was dominant.

As for as national identity is concerned, the Soviet Union conducted the policy of de-ethnization. It favoured the notion of a multicultural (*internatsionalniy*) Soviet identity, and emphasized the unity between the peoples of the Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, it was an empire, and more precisely, Russian dominant empire. But the Soviets lacked the definition of nation-state and never attempted to create such idea. On the contrary, the Soviet state had to be a unifying platform for all ethnic groups under the umbrella of "elder Russian brother".

At the same time, Moscow had a policy towards ethnic groups in Soviet Union republic and autonomies. The central authorities promoted locals to administrative positions in the respective republics and autonomies (Georgian in Georgia, Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, etc). This policy (*korenizatsiya*) was designed to foster loyal communist elite in peripheries.

As a part of this process, the Soviets introduced the local languages, knowledge of history and folk arts in curricula in the republics. Such education was formal, but sometimes caused tension. In the 1970s, some representatives of Georgian intelligentsia voiced their opposition to the decrease of teaching in Georgian language. In Azerbaijan in the 1960s some writers and poets expressed their desire for more nation-oriented education. However, such movements were quickly suppressed. The legacy of perceived imperial injustices later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was translated into nationalistic movements, which exacerbated interethnic tension.

All these features are important for understanding of the social context of the post-Soviet education. The Soviet legacy left a significant imprint on the whole system – schools, teachers, curricula, and management.

3. Social Environment and Education

The transition period in post-Soviet countries was characterised by the sharp decline in GDP, the rise of poverty and as a result, significant cut in the public funding for education. Social environment was heavily and negatively affected by sharp stratification of the society. Against this background, the republics tried to forge unity and to foster national identity. Nationalism was one of the convenient means for the government to alleviate social differences and unite people under ethnic umbrella. However, social disparity undermined these efforts.

Population groups with the lowest income including refugees in such countries as Azerbaijan, Georgia and others, which often live in camps and survive on international aid, low-paid rural workers, and the urban poor send their children for work. There is a growing number of unofficial dropout (officially there is compulsory 8 or 9 years education in most post-Soviet schools) (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2004). While during the Soviet Union era, the communist authorities intervened to protect people from extreme poverty and hunger, the independence was accompanied by economic, political, and social discord, which resulted in the collapse of many societal structures and the destruction of the social safety net.

The transition period in post-Soviet countries did not bring anticipated wealth; vice versa it has brought chaos, conflicts, and hardship. Initially people hoped that "invisible hand" of capitalism would quickly bring them the opulence of the Western countries. For the majority of people economic life under capitalism became even worse than under communism. Stiglitz (2002), a Nobel-prize winner economist, stresses that the middle class has been devastated, and a system of crony and mafia capitalism has been created instead.

Corruption remains one of the major problems. After the fall of the Soviet control the education sector became highly corrupted. Today teachers with low salaries demand bribes, students, who do not want to study, give bribes and receive good grades. In contrast, a very bright, hard working, but not bribing student might get lower grades than he/she is objectively entitled to (Baimova, 2005). The low quality of teaching, high dropout rates, and corruption in the system have contributed to a widespread public perception that the actual knowledge, skills, and qualifications that students receive through education are not worth much. (ADB, 2004, 20)

Another important problem, in building national identity is the lack of social values. The Soviet values were condemned and dismantled after the collapse. The new ideology was not successfully developed and still it has not replaced the old one. Over the time, some policy-makers and experts argue that destruction of all Soviet values in education is mistake. The Soviet educational system had a high morale appeal.

It focused on classical studies and enforced the teaching of humanities (classical music, fine arts, history, poetry, etc.). Today the emerging vacuum is being filled, in some cases, with radical doctrines ranging from soft nationalism to extremism and even Nazism.

Social division is another problem in schools. During the Soviet Union all students were obliged to wear one standard uniform. Make-up, jewelry, or fancy hairstyling were strictly forbidden. "Now most students, freed of their uniforms, try to make a fashion statement by the way they dress. The cult of materialism flourishes as each item of clothing or accessory indicates the type of connections one's parents have, whether they have access to hard currency, and the ability to travel abroad." (Wanner, 1995, 11)

Another problem in building national identity is how to embrace the youth. If this process is not addressed within the educational framework, then building national idenity might give a fertile ground for radical movements. For the youth it might be turned into extremist exercises and street manifestations. The emergence of "skin-heads' in the Russian streets is a good example for this context.

4. Nationalism

Many ethnic issues, roots of which can be traced back to the beginning of twentieth and early centuries, were rather suppressed than resolved during the Soviet Union. These dormant problems burst out with a new strength during the dissolution of the federalist Soviet state. The newly emerged countries put forward territorial claims, and minorities tried to reach the independence – all these resulted in bloody ethnic wars and forceful expulsion of people.

As it has already been mentioned, the communist period was quite successful in promoting egalitarian values. During the transition these values were lost. Time came for the division along both social and ethnic lines became more vivid. Ethnic tension was caused not only by old dormant issues. New states in forming their national identities instigated the rise of nationalism. Educational systems were also caught in interethnic debates.

Ismailova (2004), analyzing a new post-Soviet educational policy in Kyrgyzstan, concludes that the process of indigenization of the education had positive and negative effects on learners. It has positively affected people who previously, during the Soviet rule, were subjugated. At the same time, the indigenization caused the rise of nationalism and thus discriminated against the non-indigenous population of the country. Almost all post-Soviet countries went through indigenization, a process (in education) of advancement of national history, language, literature and values. Indigenization is also called sometimes cultural nationalism and as such is an integral part of wider notion of nationalism.

During the Soviet time, the knowledge about national history in many republics was suppressed or distorted. The main goal of the Soviet curricula was to claim the desire of non-Russian peoples to be united with Russians. The schooling and training in local languages was formal and diminished in favor of Russian language. When the Soviet Union collapsed and new states faced a dilemma of building national bureaucracy and statehood the knowledge of local languages became essential. This issue became highly politicized and caused interethnic tensions. Ismailova (2004) maintains that in the post-Soviet context, by helping one group, indigenization appeared to cause constraints for other ethnic groups and minorities by ignoring their contributions (p. 260).

Heyneman (2002) points out the role of education in promoting social cohesion. This task was much more difficult under new circumstances in post-Soviet countries. The establishment of an effective educational system in an open society and multiparty democracy was significantly different and profoundly more complex than it was under the single party state system. Pedagogy challenges in the region were related to both teachers (teaching) and students (learning). The long existed traditions of Soviet indoctrination made easy, on one side, for the government to advance their ideas. On the other side, new circumstances (more freedom, open media, etc.) was favorable for demagogues to highjack the political podium and instigate interethnic animosity. The youth was particularly vulnerable to various radical movements.

Smith et al. (1998) believe that the post-colonial process of creation of national identities can facilitate solidarity and play a positive role in nation building but that should be accompanied by democratization. Otherwise, there is a danger of emphasizing and privileging one dominant ethnic group to the detriment of the wider community. "If the post-colonial desire is the desire of decolonized communities for an identity, then that identity in the post-Soviet borderlands is being shaped as much by the ethnic politics of exclusion and division as it is by inclusion and coexistence" (p.1)

Smith et al. further argue that much of the policy aimed at nationalism was propelled by country's elite. After post-Stalin era, during the stagnation of the corrupted Soviet economy, particularly in the 1970-1980s, the Soviet republics communist elite were successful in "championing and politicizing ethnorepublic economic interests and needs" (p.5) within the limits permitted by Moscow. When this controlling body was removed, the republics' elite tried to strengthen their control over the resources through the promotion of nationalism.

For minorities the process of transformation from minority group into a full-fledged country's citizen was impeded by both dominant national and by local minority elite. The issue over the control of resources was at stake. Local minorities' leaders, similar to the leaders of the country, tried to capitalize new opportunities to control local resources. They were frequently instigated by Russia, which pursued the policy of "divide and rule" and wished to preserve the influence over the former republics by manipulating with ethnic separatism. Conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and partly in Azerbaijan can be understood in the context of post-colonial struggle between former metropolis and its colonies.

Case Studies

I would like to illustrate the abovementioned assumptions on several mini case studies. I have chosen three countries – Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for examining various types of socio-political systems which existed within the context of post-Soviet transition. Ukraine is considered as a pro-democratic type of country, Kazakhstan as semi-democratic and Uzbekistan as authoritarian. The analysis of the social context of educational policy and nation-building process helps to understand the direction which post-Soviet countries opted for and proves the correlation between the ideology and the education.

Ukraine. As many other Soviet republics Ukraine suffered from USSR's policy of "Russification." Ukrainian nation was depicted in the Soviet school as a subgroup or branch of the Russian nation which departed from the main ethnic core in the early Middle Ages and then in the 17th century "voluntarily" joined the Russian empire. All soviet historical textbooks in the Soviet republics claimed their voluntary joining the Russian Empire.

Ukrainian revival of its national identity started with history and literature. Ukraine referred to its pre-Soviet past in shaping national identity, as all other republics (Kuzio, 2002). Ukrainian historian based the tradition of national statehood on "Kyivan Rus", an ancient state which emerged more than 1000 years ago. The new Ukrainian national identity was based on anti-Russian motives. The Ukrainian historians blamed Russia and Soviet empire in imposing great famine in 1932-1933, in massive repressions of the 1930s, Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe in 1986, etc. All these happened because Ukraine was Russian colony, not an independent state (Kuzio, 2002, 252). However, such anti-Russian sentiments caused problems in Eastern Ukraine with vast Russian population.

Ukraine as a single state had several regional divisions. Western Ukraine which was a part of Poland until the 1940s is nationalistic and anti-Russian, Eastern Ukraine was pro-Russian and Central Ukraine with the capital city Kyiv is a mixture of both inclinations with Ukrainians which speak Russian as the mother tongue. Therefore, it was highly important to strengthen national identity, and the government employed all opportunities, including the education, and particularly, in Russian-speaking Ukrainian families. "By targeting education for reform, political leaders capitalize on the potential to incorporate into the very experience and memory of the first post-Soviet generation elements of Ukrainian culture, language, and historical memory to naturalize a Ukrainian identity among children of Russian-speaking families." (Wanner, 1995, 8)

Ukrainian educational reform was aimed at eliminating "authoritarian pedagogy put in place by a totalitarian state which led to the suppression of natural talents and capabilities and interests of all participants in the educational process." (Wanner, 1995, 11) The government launched bold measures for introducing Ukrainian language as state official language, new historiography, etc. However, economic difficulties impeded the publication of new textbooks and introduction of new educational materials. Reforming the educational practices and habits was a more complex problem. The formal aspects of Soviet education were easier to reform than the practices installed by the Soviet system. Aside from a rigorous adherence to a uniform curriculum, Soviet schools were characterized by strict discipline and relatively high standards of learning. The turbulence of post-Soviet society, coupled with extreme material hardship in schools and at home, has prompted a sharp decline in student performance, which all teachers and administrators lament (Wanner, 1995, 11).

Today Ukrainian schooling is also suffering from corruption, clashes of two values – the Soviet legacy with new "wild capitalist" tendencies, and financial shortages. As the issue of national identity is not yet settled, and the conflict in the east remains the major threat to country;s security, the educational sector also caught in the ideological struggle. As Ukraine moved towards more democratic society, political debates penetrated every aspect of social life and influenced other branches of the state, including the education.

Kazakhstan. In the Middle Ages Kazakhstan was populated by various groups of nomadic tribes. Almost half of modern day Kazakhstan during Soviet rule was populated by non-Kazakh people. In the 1990s in order to strengthen the Kazakh titular group, the government moved its capital from south (populated mainly by Kazakhs) to north (dominated by Russians).

Kazakh authorities legitimize its statehood by drawing historiography based on Turkic nomadic tribal traditions. Educational establishments are creating new identity heavily relying on traditional social, cultural, and ethnical values. Today Kazakhstan faces a difficult nation-building project as it is not only divided by language but is also a bi-ethnic state with two large ethnic groups: Kazakhs (70 %) and Russians (30 %). "Nevertheless, Kazakhstan argues that it is building a state on the basis of a 500-year tradition of statehood going back to the mid-fifteenth century Kazakh Khanate" (Kuzio, 2002, 258).

I should give credit to Kazakh authorities for their success in keeping ethnic peace in such a difficult domestic and foreign environment. Despite the fact that the government rigorously promoted national identity, it has managed to avoid interethnic clashes. In Kazakhstan, unlike some other Central Asian republics, certain freedoms are ensured. It has relatively free media, opposition parties operate, and the discussions are open to wide public on various political and economic matters. Economic liberalization has gone far as compared to many other republics. However, as many other republics Kazakhstan's social net has undergone a decline in the 1990s and has recently recovered as oil money has started flowing into the country (up until last year's financial crisis caused by tenge's devaluation). The government has introduced new system of financing the educational sector and enlarged the private schools and universities. The central authorities define general principles of educational management, reform priorities, and principles of new curricula. Public participation in education policy has mainly taken the forms of experts' meetings and limited public debates through the mass media (ADB, 2004, 26).

An important issue in Kazakhstan is the education for minorities - Russian, Uzbek, Uigur, Tajik, German and others. As Kazakh national identity is reinforced at every level, minorities are also encouraged to study "the national curriculum". The government tries to call back Kazakhs living abroad, especially in China, with the purpose of increasing the Kazakh population in the country. The number of Russian-speaking schools, dominant during the Soviet rule, have declined dramatically, essentially due to the outmigration of Russians from Kazakhstan. The ADB report stresses that, policy-makers and pedagogues still consider that education in the native language and preservation of cultural identity are critical in promoting the integration into a single community of all ethnic groups in Kazakhstan. Other concerns, including curriculum revision to reflect values of peace and tolerance, appear to have received little attention. (p.30)

The Soviet legacy also impedes the development of educational sector. As the quality of education dropped, the educational authorities, which mainly consisted of old Soviet managers, instead of concentrating efforts on introduction of a new curriculum, opted for sustaining the outdated Soviet standards. As a result, the curriculum, particularly in rural areas, has fallen short of modern-day demands, "i.e., failing to encourage the practical application of knowledge gained in the classroom, to promote the skills of learning, to make learning a lifelong pursuit, or to prepare school leavers for employment and for an active role in society." (ADB, 2004, 37)

Further the ADB report argues that despite economic growth, its positive impact is less visible in solution of social problems - poverty affects social well-being the country's population. In the meantime, the report views positively the potential of the education system and "in both the short and long term, education will play a crucial part in bolstering the democratic gains of the last decade." (p.37)

Overall, I believe that despite shortcomings Kazakhstan has made careful policy choice with regard to national identity building. The social context is characterized by less contrast turbulences. The revival of national narratives has not caused interethnic conflicts, nor was the country divided along the ethnic lines. The secular nature of the country structures, including education remained untouched despite the fact that in the south – in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Islamic movements cause serious concern for the society's stability.

Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan, as compared to other previous cases, is characterized by the heavy control of the state over country's political, economic and social life. Unlike other two post-Soviet republics, Uzbekistan has not yet launched full economic reforms. Its pro-Soviet command control over the national economy is also present in other branches of the state.

In terms of national identity building Uzbekistan's leadership led by the president Islam Karimov opted for a gradualist approach. Reintroducing pre-Soviet past occurs without destroying everything created during the Soviet rule. (Yalcin, 2002). However, Russian language and Soviet interpretation of history was quickly removed and replaced by Uzbek nationalism. During the Soviet Union domination of Russian language fuelled aspiration for restoration of Uzbek pride – language, national history, and tradition.

The key element of Uzbek national identity is its medieval history with the emphasis on the reign of Tamerlan (Amir Temur). Through the rise of medieval heroes and the creation of ancient myths the government has strengthened the respect to modern leaders. The Uzbek nation is depicted as strong and the country's elite led by the president is propagated as a sole supporter of the "great Uzbek nation".

The state control of economy allowed alleviating some difficulties of transition. The educational institutions received due care on the part of the government. The implementation of the reforms, the introduction of new methodology, however, was limited due to overall command system chosen by the government to rule the country. The ADB report (2004) highlights that management methods are still Soviet type ones, the education and training of teachers is insufficiently responsive to the demands of the market economy. In education institutions, there is still a large measure of conservatism characterized by old-fashioned attitudes and behavior, lack of flexibility, ineffective response to sociopolitical and economic changes, and inadequate support of initiative and innovations. The progress of economic and social reforms remains slow, and democratization and liberalization is thwarted. "Talented people are moving away from the education sector to the private sector. Largely because of low incomes in rural areas, child labor—used as a matter of economic necessity for family subsistence—is a serious problem." (ADB, 2004, 105-106). Therefore, children frequently omit classes in rural areas.

Unlike Kazakhstan, Islam plays significant role in Uzbek national identity. Despite the government efforts to dilute Islamic agenda, the religion influence increases partially due to external influences from Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Silova, Johnson and Heyneman (2007) point out that, the most important element in understanding the challenges of education and social cohesion in post-Soviet countries is to recognize the loss of the Soviet values and the vacuum emerged after the collapse of the USSR. For seven decades Soviet education promoted such values as equality, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the Soviet nation. Today, with some modifications all countries are trying to replace the Soviet past with new values and principles. However, the interethnic tensions, new "fashion" of consumerism, free market ideology complicates the educational policy. Pedagogues and experts ponder: "how can their new countries effectively utilize education to create a new sense of social cohesion and new unified national identities in the face of these challenges?" (p. 161)

Conclusion

The three case-studies illustrate that the social context of education in post-Soviet countries is characterized by the legacy of the Soviet system and nationalism. The process of forming national identity is a challenging task for the educators. They are heavily influenced by state policy and ideology. The creation of new statehood inevitably leads to the rise of nationalism. However, it is up to the government to fuel or vice versa to smooth the difficulties associated with this transition.

The educational deterioration is another great source of instability. Despite the nationalism, many post-Soviet countries had the history of coexistence, multiculturalism and tolerance. The rise of nationalism can not be blamed alone for undermining social cohesion. Secular public educational systems are one of the important instruments which can "either help to hold together—or contribute to the failure of—these struggling states." (Silova et al., 2007, 176) The important problem is whether the government can stop the exacerbation of the social context of education and take more care about the poor. For promoting social cohesion the governments should strengthen democratic values and introduce this component to new curricula.

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