

Guest Commentary

Russism – New Nazism. Denazifying denazifier: Neo-Nazis as the only international support for Putin's aggression on Ukraine¹

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ABSTRACT

Denazification, as one of the proclaimed goals of Russian aggression against Ukraine, stems from the concept of “Russian world”, the ideological basis on which Russia's internal social model is built, and especially its position in relation to its environment and the world. This model has many similarities with the system established by the National Socialist Party in Germany in the 1930s and many parallels can be drawn between Nazi Germany and today's Russia, as aggressive and imperial powers. Civilisational superiority, national homogenisation, leadership cults, militarism, opposition to the values of Western liberal democracy, return of “historical territories – these are some of the similarities between these two systems. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has received support exclusively from neo-Nazi groups in Eastern Europe and the US, among others. This support is the result of years of Russia investing huge amounts of resources in discrediting liberal democracies, undermining the unity of Western integration and reshaping the narrative in which Russia, as one of the victors over Nazism in World War II, feels it has enough credit to turn into the opposite against which it fought and won 80 years ago.

Keywords

**■ Russia ■ Ukraine ■ Russian world ■ Neo-Nazism ■ Extremism
■ Imperialism ■ Aggression ■ Eastern Europe ■ Balkans**

¹ ***Note from the editor:*** This piece refers to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in progress at the time this issue was being prepared for publication (April 2022). The author pointedly makes the case that the “denazification” goal of the Russian invasion is untenable, while the support from the world for actions of Putin's Russia comes from neo-Nazi organizations. The dramatism of these developments and the timeliness of the content have determined the RJSP editorial team to include this text in the current issue, which was scheduled to appear in December 2021 and was not published in time due to previously unforeseen events.

I. Introduction

Along with demilitarisation, Russia's second proclaimed war goal at the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine was “denazification”. These two goals were announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin on 24 February 2022, the day the invasion of Ukraine began, defining them as “the purpose of this special military operation”². Since then, these terms have become the backbone of Russian propaganda and narratives within which the action in Ukraine is conducted. State and military officials, all media in Russia, but also their supporters around the world, who justify and support the Russian invasion, firmly hold on to these expressions.

While “demilitarisation” is relatively easily understood as a motive for aggression, because it has military content and can sound like a tangible reason for someone's armed action, “denazification” has caused a lot of surprises and disbelief around the world. Where did the fight against the Nazis come from in the twenty-first century, almost eight decades after their military and political destruction? What does it mean to “denazify” someone, and especially to “denazify” an entire country, which also happens to be one of the largest in Europe? How will the military operation, with this goal, be able to end, who will be able to measure that the degree of “nazification” of Ukraine has been reduced to zero?

Occupation is the only realistic goal Russia has had in mind. One cannot denazify and demilitarise a large country and go back home. Therefore that true goal was to annex Ukraine and to destroy and capture anyone in Ukraine who opposed Russia. This is why Putin and Russia propaganda outlets were always insisting that Ukraine does not exist and in fact is all Russia.

It is difficult to give rational answers to these questions, but the explanation can be seen if we invoke psychoanalysis. Things become simpler and more logical when we view the issue of “denazification” as a form of projection, one of the most common mechanisms for defending oneself from one's own unacceptable subconscious. The leader of one nation (Putin) talks about “denazification” by projecting it on his enemy (Ukraine) because he is

² *** (2022, February 24). *Full Text: Putin's declaration of war on Ukraine*, The Spectator, available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-putin-s-declaration-of-war-on-ukraine>.

trying to defend himself from his own ego-driven subconscious, which tells him that he, and not someone else, is a Nazi.

The glorification of Russian culture, proclaiming Russia as an alternative civilisation and at the same time absolute biased and militaristic criticism of western countries by Russian propaganda left no doubts that the Russian doctrine of so called “Russian world” is nothing but modern-day fascism.

The old fascism utilised symbolism, spiritualism and glorification military might. This new Russian fascism (*Russism*) similarly worships the dead (fallen soldiers during the Second World War), has made a cult from the victory itself and managed to unify this cult with the Russian Orthodox Church.

There are many patterns and evidence of the identification of Russia and its leader with Nazism in the motives for the invasion of Ukraine, its war goals, the behaviour of the Russian army, and especially in the long period of preparation that preceded this war. In addition, the support from the world that Putin received for his aggression against Ukraine comes exclusively from individuals and organisations with distinct Nazi values and patterns of behaviour. In this article, we will primarily talk about them, as an important parameter that marks the policy of the Russian leader and his country as “pro-” or “neo-”Nazi.

II. Nazi Germany – Putin's Russia, a reflection in a mirror

There are many parallels between today's Russia, created by the twenty-year rule of Vladimir Putin, and the Nazi movement that shaped Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. The aggression on Ukraine brought many of these similarities to the surface and made them visible to the global population.

Just as Hitler once homogenised the nation and made it a collaborator in creating a false narrative with which he could embark on a war of conquest, presenting it as justified, so Putin has long shaped the public in his country, making them partners in creating a common “reality”, which gives reason to conquer.

However, Putin is not Hitler, nor is Russia Nazi Germany. Umberto Eco said that it would be very simple if someone appeared in a black shirt and said that he wanted to send all Jews to concentration camps and form a state on Nazi principles³. Then everything would be easier because we would know clearly what kind of evil we are dealing with and how to fight it. There are frightening similarities between Putin's Russia and Hitler's Germany, but we must be aware that in addition to numerous, almost identical phenomenological designations of these two regimes, there are significant differences between them. It is the detection of these differences, no matter how seemingly small and irrelevant to the final outcome for the victims of these two criminal regimes, that forms the basis of the strategy for combating Putin's aggression. Putin's operation has been prepared for a long time and has been carried out in several directions.

One branch of this complex and lengthy operation was aimed at Russia from within. Systematic suppression of the critical public, through the banning of the media, pressure, persecution and even the physical liquidation of independent journalists (Anna Politkovskaya) is a Russian everyday life during Putin's rule. The same recipe applies to political opponents (the murder of Boris Nemtsov, the arrest and poisoning of Alexei Navalny). Eliminating opponents was even more important in the circle of rich Russians, if they showed even a hint that they could engage in politics, or oppose the social and political model dictated by Putin. Their list is long, and the methods of reckoning are brutal, from murders to arrests. It was also brutal to organise a meeting of President Putin with the biggest Russian “oligarchs” at the very beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, because it represented forcing of allegiance in the “brotherhood in blood”, and an open threat to stay with the national cause regardless of sanctions and the economic damage they will experience.

The Russian world and Russian Marches have a long history. Even Alexey Navalny was an organiser of Russian Marches. These were alt-right events saturated by Chauvinism and perhaps even a literal glorification of Russian nationalism.

³ Eco, U. (1995). “Ur-Fascism”, The New York Review of Books, available at: https://www.pegc.us/archive/Articles/eco_ur-fascism.pdf.

In addition to intimidation, the Russian population has been subjected to a terrible psychological operation for years, which was supposed to (unfortunately, to a large extent succeeded) create robots ready to do anything at the moment when the “great leader” wants it.

Narratives that have been distributed to Russian citizens for years are a mixture of post-Soviet nostalgia, fictional historical stories about the former greatness and glory of Imperial Russia, the celebration of the “Great Patriotic War” (the Second World War), through military parades which were supposed to show the power of Russian weapons, resentment for great deception and humiliation that a “corrupt and perverted West” inflicted on Russia, rejection of “Western perversions and decay” and acceptance of “traditional values of the Russian people”, which are mainly based on perverted Orthodoxy and cults invented for current needs.

In addition, very similar to Hitler Jugend in Nazi Germany, youth organisations were formed, such as the Nashi movement, which would spread ideology of Putinism among the youth and develop a fighting spirit in them. Night Wolves, a biker organisation that gathers criminals, looks especially tragicomic, and with its iconography and appearance it irresistibly resembles the crime group of motorcyclists from Hollywood dystopian films of B-production.

This psychological operation that the Russian regime is conducting against its citizens, no matter how inconsistent it may seem in its messages and often stupid in its claims, has achieved a notable result with the intimidation campaign, because the vast majority of Russians support the aggression against Ukraine. The ideological thread on which this propaganda activity is based is in the works of Alexander Dugin, who all those familiar with the situation in Russia consider Putin's main ideologist.

The second branch over the years has been focused on the most influential Western countries, their public, as well as members of the political and economic elite. The goal of the long-term systematic hybrid operation was to destabilise the traditional institutions of liberal democracies, cast doubt on their efficiency and fairness, as well as to create a rift in the bloc of liberal democracies, primarily in their relationship with Russia.

For that purpose, cyberspace in the largest Western countries was manipulated, systematically and under the control of the state of Russia, and with a lot of success. There is ample evidence that Donald Trump's presidential term is the result of Russia's destructive influence on the American public, in which, for example, in just two years (2015-2017), thirty million social media users shared and communicated messages generated by Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA)⁴. There were such operations in France, Britain, members of the European Union, and all together aimed at the Western liberal world awaiting some future Russian operation, which will have strategic geopolitical significance, divided and disoriented. Just like the aggression on Ukraine.

Just as the Nazis in Germany created an alternative world with Germany at its centre, Putin's regime managed to convince the Russian population of belonging to a special civilisation, completely different, and even superior to others. In the time of Hitler, this concept was expressed in the Third Reich, and in the Putin era –it is in terms of the Russian world. Scientists close to the Kremlin, media commentators, artists and the Russian Orthodox Church have been working on and developing this concept since 2000, when Putin came to power, and made his field debut with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Putin himself justified the action with the nature of the “Russian world”. This concept basically strives for the unification of the Russians, regardless of the borders of independent states, the restoration of national unity, and above all sees Russia and the Russians as a separate “civilisation” that must defend itself from external forces, especially the West.

The ideology of the “Russian world” was created by Alexander Dugin in the book “The Fourth Political Theory”, which he published in 2009⁵. Dugin is the sharpest opponent of liberal democracy, that is, capitalism, and he directs his blade at fascism and Marxism, which he mostly resents for not being able to break liberalism, but for helping it survive. Dugin believes that a fourth political theory, which is based on the mythical understanding of the people, as something that exists forever and stems from language, culture, history

⁴ Howard, P. N. *et al.* (2018). *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States 2012-2018*, Oxford, UK: University of Oxford.

⁵ Dugin, A. (2012). *The Fourth Political Theory*, translated by: Sleboda M. and Millerman M., London, UK: Arktos Media.

and religion is necessary. Of course, in his ultranationalist vision, the Russians are that great historical nation with a historical mission. In his opinion, Russia must reject both fascism and Marxism, which prevent it from fighting liberal democracy, and embrace his theory of the people in order to suppress the “evil of liberalism that leads both man and people to certain ruin”.

It is clear that Dugin's theory has its geopolitical origins, which he explained in several of his books (such as *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997); *The Great Awakening vs the Great Reset* (2021)), articles and media interviews. Dugin stands for Eurasia, a community of people who have a common language, culture, religion and “national values”, as opposed to the Atlantic world. Dugin believes that Russia's main geopolitical mission is to challenge US dominance in the world and regain all “Russian” territories. Dugin strongly advocated the annexation of Crimea, supporting the separatists in Donbas and Luhansk, which he calls New Russia.

In his “memorandum” published on social networks, Dugin stated that Russia's war is not a war with Ukraine, but with globalism as a planetary phenomenon. Dugin believes that this is a war on all levels, both ideological and geopolitical. According to Dugin, Russia's biggest enemies are unipolarity, Atlanticism, liberalism, and anti-traditionalism. He describes the war in Ukraine as a “great reset” and the fight against European leaders who are all part of the Atlantic elite.

Alexander Dugin's influence is visible in Putin's speech given at the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Putin denied the existence of the Ukrainian nation, which was created by the division of the Russian people, of course under the influence of the Bolsheviks and later the West. He referred to the Russian language as an identity determinant, which is allegedly banned in Ukraine. Putin's reference to history, spirituality, and even mysticism is part of Dugin's vocabulary, and even the words “Anti Russia”, which he used to describe his view of the situation in Ukraine, is related to Dugin.

In this concept, one can read through parallels with Nazism –the feeling of the need to regain “historical territories”, once the Sudetenland, today Crimea and Donbas, once Austria, and today Ukraine. In both concepts, the people are mobilised and united around the principle of “blood and soil”, once German, now Slavic, Russian. Both ideological

narratives inevitably give birth to a cult of personality, because the firm, determined and patriotic leadership of one man is a precondition for the historical mission to be carried out, once Hitler, today Putin.

Like the Nazis in the past, Putin's Russia today blames the West for its suffering and problems, its economic and democratic achievements, which it considers corrupt, unjust, even violent, and certainly aimed at destroying the once German and today Russian social model. Just as the Jews who, in the eyes of the Nazis, were an emanation of that danger for German society under Hitler and were considered an entity that has no (and should not have) existence, so Putin's Russia denies the independence of Ukraine and Ukrainians. "Ukraine has never had a tradition of true statehood", Putin said on the day of the Russian invasion, in full accordance with the narrative broadcasted by his propaganda for years according to which Ukrainians are a kind of artificial national creation, but that they are actually Russians.

Even the model for the beginning of the aggression irresistibly draws a parallel between Nazi Germany and Putin's Russia. Just as Germany suddenly, without warning or reason, attacked Poland in 1939, so Russia attacked Ukraine after persistently repeating that it had no military ambitions and that the offensive was not only ruled out, but was a product of Western propaganda.

III. Preparing Europe

At the time of the cooling of relations between Russia and the West and the imposition of sanctions on Moscow over the annexation of Crimea, there were as many as 45 influential political parties and movements across Europe that supported Russian policy, shared its values and understood its interests, especially in relations with the West⁶.

Among them, on the far-right were the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the Greek Golden Dawn, the Hungarian Jobbik, the French National

⁶ Dennison, S. and Paradijs, D. (2016, June 26). "The world according to Europe's insurgent parties: Putin, migration and people power", European Council on Foreign Relations, available at: https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_world_according_to_europes_insurgent_parties7055/.

Front, the Italian Northern League, the British UKIP, and the Belgian Flemish Interest (VB). On the far-left the pro-Russian parties are AKEL from Cyprus, the German Left Party (Die Linke), the Czech KSCM, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, as well as the Italian Five Star Movement and the Human Shield in Croatia.

These parties were not necessarily directly influenced by Moscow to pursue their policies, although the direct ties (including financial) of some of them were later revealed, but no doubt their activities largely allowed the creation of an environment in which Russian aggression on Ukraine could take place. They created a favourable pretext within the EU and NATO for some Russian imperial interests to be treated as legitimate and to lead to a sharp confrontation within Western integrations and ultimately to weaken the internal cohesion ties of Western partners. This was precisely the long-term interest of Moscow, which fit into its anti-Western narrative, but also as an important factor in which it could freely develop its aggressive plans for the realisation of the “Russian world”.

In addition, Moscow has corrupted leading politicians from many European countries in various ways, tying them to itself and its interests. Gerhard Schröder and Francois Fillon, as well as entire sets of conservative governments in Vienna, are just some of the most famous European leaders who have moved from politics to the management boards of Russian energy giants.

IV. Recruitment of neo-Nazis

At the same time, Russia sought and found allies for the realisation of its imperial and aggressive ambitions among extremist, neo-Nazi and terrorist groups throughout Europe and even America. Just as in the case of legal and influential parties, the ideological structure of these pro-Russian organisations is the same. They nurture a strong anti-migrant attitude, in the case of extremists it is pure racism, a very strong anti-systemic orientation that denies the values of Western, liberal democracy, then a strong bias towards minorities of all kinds, especially sexual, and many have pronounced white supremacism and anti-Semitism.

1. The USA

It is in America that groups of white Supremacists are most susceptible to Russian influence, those who inherit Nazi values such as anti-Semitism, the fight against the conspiracy of international capital and intolerance towards the LGBT. US investigators have identified The Base as a neo-Nazi and terrorist group, and its leader Norman Spear as a Russian agent. European media, the BBC and the Guardian will later prove that his real name is Rinaldo Nazzaro and that he was in Russia in 2019 as a guest of the government at an exhibition dedicated to security, as well as that he organised branches of his organisation in Britain, Australia and Canada.

David Duke, a former member of the Louisiana State Congress and leader of the Ku Klux Klan, also found refuge in Russia. Faced with a federal investigation into embezzlement, the racist and anti-Semite has been to Russia on several occasions, where he has received a warm welcome, often spoken in public, and his book *My Awakening* has been sold in bookstores in the Russian parliament.

The Russian ties of Jared Taylor, leader of a white supremacist organisation named the American Renaissance, and Matthew Heimbach, leader of the Traditionalist Worker Party, were also proven as they were meeting with Russian ultranationalist leaders in 2015 and 2017⁷.

Recognising it as the main channel for organising a transnational network of terrorist and extremist organisations, at the expense of Russian imperialist goals, the State Department in 2020 marked the Russian Imperial Movement as a terrorist organisation⁸. It is an organisation that undoubtedly functions with the support of the Kremlin, although it is hardly visible due to the complicated connections between the state, capital, intelligence services and church circles. As in the case of the international “military wing” of this same

⁷ Grimm Arsenault, E. and Stabile, J. (2020). “Confronting Russia’s Role in Transnational White Supremacist Extremism”, *Just Security*, available at: <https://www.justsecurity.org/68420/confronting-russias-role-in-transnational-white-supremacist-extremism/>.

⁸ Foggett, S., Saltskog, M., Clarke, C. (2022). “How Are Putin’s far-right Fans in the West Reacting to his War?”, *War on the Rocks*, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/how-are-putins-far-right-fans-in-the-west-reacting-to-his-war/>.

octopus, the Wagner group, which undoubtedly has the patronage of the Kremlin, although it persistently denies it.

2. Eastern Europe

The network of Russian partners from the circle of extremists and neo-Nazis is especially developed in Eastern Europe, an area of priority interest for Russia's ambitions to complete the “Russian world”. These are mostly small but very aggressive groups, which are easy to manipulate and even easier to buy. The Hungarian Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement is a typical example, because its actions coincide with Russia's interest in denying the existing order in Eastern Europe and encouraging ethnic and cultural differences in this region, including crossing the border of violence. This organisation, which gathers Hungarian right-wing youth, recruited like-minded people outside the country, emphasised territorial claims to Ukraine (“Transcarpathia is not part of Ukraine”), organised protests in support of the Donetsk People's Republic, and even called for a boycott of chocolate which was produced by the company of former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko⁹.

In Poland, the counter-intelligence service investigated Mateusz Piskorski, the leader of the left-wing organisation Change, as well as activists of the ultra-right Confederation of Independent Poland (KNP) on charges of espionage on behalf of Russia. They organised actions in Ukraine to provoke conflicts against ethnic Poles in the west of the country. A “consulate” of the Donetsk People's Republic was opened in the Czech Republic in 2016, without the approval of state bodies, with the help of several extreme right-wing groups, including the paramilitary group Territorial Defence Force.

3. The Balkans

Russia has also found a very fertile ground for the recruitment of extremist and neo-Nazi groups for its own purposes in the Balkans, a region it has traditionally been interested in

⁹ Kreko, P. and Gyori, L. (2017, May). “From Russia with Hate: The Kremlin’s Support for Violent Extremism in Central Europe”, Atlantic Council, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/from-russia-with-hate-the-kremlin-s-support-for-violent-extremism-in-central-europe/>.

and in whose instability it recognises its strategic interest in matching Europe's integrative ambitions. Given the dominance of the Orthodox population in several Balkan countries (Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, partly Bosnia and Herzegovina), Russia seeks to abuse widespread pro-Russian sentiment to exacerbate ethnic differences to full conflict, as it is a good way to keep the region in a state of constant instability and away from European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Although not every Russophile in the Balkans is a neo-Nazi, every neo-Nazi in the Balkans is a Russophile –they are perhaps more precisely a fan of Vladimir Putin, his current, and especially his imagined future Russia.

One leader, one religion, and one nation –this is just one of the common “values” of Balkan extremists, turning them into replicas of old, Nazi ideas. There is also the superiority, and the Orthodox Slavs being the chosen ones in relation to other religions and nations. Anti-Semitism is also implied, as is racism towards migrants from the Middle East and local Roma. All pro-Putin groups in the Balkans present themselves as militant and militarised, ready for arms. Like their predecessors in the 1930s, they long for the return of territories that “naturally” belong to Serbia (or Russia). Their role models from the past are quislings from the period of German occupation in the Second World War. In the Balkans, they do not recognise the existence of any nation other than the Serbian one; they celebrate war crimes from the 1990s against Muslims and Albanians, especially the genocide in Srebrenica as a heroic act. After Putin, Ratko Mladić is the greatest idol and authority.

During the first month of the war in Ukraine, two major street demonstrations were organised in Belgrade, at which support was given to Russia and Putin for their armed aggression. Both were organised by extreme right-wingers from the People's Patrols, the Serbian-Russian Movement and the Serbian Action¹⁰. According to all the characteristics, they are pure neo-Nazis, who also adore the Russian president and consider him the leader of the Orthodox world in the fight against the West.

Muscular, tattooed and uniformed guys from the Serbian Honor organisation, originally registered in Niš, Serbia, are very active in Republika Srpska. There is a Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in this city, officially an interstate hub for quick interventions in cases

¹⁰ Euractiv (2022, March). *Second pro-Russia rally held in Belgrade*, available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/second-pro-russia-rally-held-in-belgrade/.

of natural disasters, but for years under great suspicion of the West that it is actually a Russian intelligence and logistics point in the centre of Serbia. It was in that centre that members of the Serbian Honor were photographed several times, and according to media reports, they practiced shooting from firearms there.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine gave these neo-Nazi groups the conviction that a great plan for the unification of Orthodox Slavs had begun, under one leader and one hegemon –namely Russia. In the realisation of that plan, they see their place and the accomplishment of their goals as a kind of little hegemon in the Balkans. Therefore, the members of the organisation Serbian Action announced that, “The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is not an ordinary regional conflict, but part of a great mystical conflict of good and evil. In that spirit, we wholeheartedly support this campaign”.

V. Conclusion

The effort of Russia and its leader Putin to justify aggression against Ukraine with the goal of “denazification” is a terrible example of cynicism, calculated to disguise their own motives and ambitions, which irresistibly coincide with the values and models of their realisation under Nazism. The imperial project of the “Russian world” is based on total control of information, elimination of all critical thought and public, militarism and aggressive behaviour towards nations and states that are considered part of “historical Russia” that needs to be renewed.

In order to weaken the capacity of the main opponent of this project, namely the West, Russia has been investing huge resources in a range of areas for two decades, including in the political, intelligence, technological and financial fields, in a bid to create a network of supporters of its interests in the most influential Western countries.

The aggression against Ukraine, and especially the proclamation of “denazification” as a war goal, also exposed the fact that Russia especially invested in the creation and expansion of neo-Nazi groups throughout Europe, in the United States and beyond. The Ukrainian crisis has shown that these groups, with all their openly neo-Nazi character and values, have remained the most loyal supporters of Putin's project. And in that way, they extremely

convincingly discredited the Russian narrative about the “denazification” of Ukraine, revealing at the same time the true nature of the regime in the Kremlin.

Putin's regime is very reminiscent of Nazism, just as all totalitarian dictatorships resemble each other. However, there are some differences in ideology and geopolitical aspirations between Nazism and Putin's totalitarianism. In this paper, we have listed the steps of Putin's ideology, whose main representative is Alexander Dugin, and the main geopolitical goals that he is already trying to achieve by aggression against Ukraine. Knowledge of the ideology and geopolitical aspirations of Putin's totalitarianism is a necessary condition for its quick destruction and elimination of the danger that Putin's Russia poses to the free world.

Although the famous saying, “The fascists of the future will call themselves antifascists”, is often attributed to Winston Churchill, he did not express something akin to that. But it still touches on what we see today as the official policy of Russia and its undisputed leader Vladimir Putin.

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