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SIMULATED DEMOCRACY AND THE FREE MARKET IN RUSSIA

Adam A. Bartnicki

**Assistant Professor; Dr.
University of Białystok Faculty of Law (Poland)**

Contact information

Address: ul. M. Skłodowskiej-Curie 14, 15-097 Białystok, Poland
Phone: +48 85 745 72 04
E-mail address: drucik22@o2.pl

Karolina Stefanowicz

**Scientific Assistant; Master of Sociology
University of Białystok Faculty of Law (Poland)**

Contact information

Address: ul. M. Skłodowskiej-Curie 14, 15-097 Białystok, Poland
Phone: +48 85 745 72 04
E-mail address: stefanowicz.karolina@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The vague character of the interests in a post-totalitarian society, which become clear when seen alongside the clear and concrete interests of the elites, seems to be an important and typical feature of Russia's politics. Consequently, society has been almost completely marginalized as a political subject, and its role has been taken over by the corporate interests groups of "big business". The political regime of present-day Russia has been, to some degree, founded on models known from developed democracies, including the institutions of the president, council of ministers, independent courts, and the freedom of the press or political parties. However, considerable differences occurred in the application of those mechanisms in Russia. For instance, the parties in the Russian political system did not succeed in becoming channels of articulation of social needs. This situation was caused by the fact that the majority of political parties and other political and social organizations have

been dominated by various interest groups and have maintained an exclusive character. Those interest groups, represented by political parties, pursued their goal by means of private and public pressure towards state decision-making institutions. Thus, both the state's and the society's priorities have been pushed aside.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarianism, oligarchy, capitalism, Russia, corruption, Yeltsin, Putin

INTRODUCTION

The ideological vacuum that was created after the fall of the USSR, as well as the ever-changing social and political situation, produced a situation in which the government(s) of formerly-communist Russia were incessantly changing the state's official ideology. Such inconsistency was surely intensifying confusion among Russian citizens and revealed that the political elites were suffering from an intellectual crisis. In a country previously saturated by the ideological omnipotence of the state, this inconsistency was extremely dangerous. Citizens stood in opposition to the state and civil society was associated with movements that fought the regime. It is difficult not to notice the antinomy that has arisen between the western path of modernization promoted by the regime and the actual consequences of this process in Russia, which neither fostered individualistic and rationalistic ideas nor strengthened liberal values and institutions.

Although political and social reforms were conducted under such auspices, the society remained collective; instead of a capitalist economy founded on competition and free-market principles, criminal capitalism emerged; instead of democratic institutions of civil society, "clans", "casts" and wassail systems appeared. The would-be civil society fell apart into criminal and semi-criminal elites on one hand and "handicapped" masses on the other.

For almost a century in the West, democracy has meant liberal democracy – a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property.¹

In the East democratically elected regimes are illiberal democracy.² In Russia governments were not interested in more active stimulation of the development of social institutions. Instead of cooperating with the society, they chose to build up a political system based on the clan and oligarchic structure. Henry E. Hale tried to bring the post-Soviet state to a single denominator by defining their system of government as *patronal presidents*. Its essence is a much stronger position of the president, elected by popular vote, than other state institutions. This is the result of both formal powers (law, constitution) and informal powers, resulting from the relationship of patron–client.³

¹ Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 76, No. 6 (November/December 1997): 22.

² *Ibid.*

³ Henry E. Hale, "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *World Politics* Vol. 58, No. 1 (October 2005).

The aim of our analysis is to show the direct negative impact that Russian capitalism has had on the democratization of public life in Russia and firming the development of civil society. The main cause of this situation was the transformation of the Russian business community into a specifically "oligarchic structure". In the nineties, public, political and economic life was dominated by oligarchs and interest groups related to them, which has seriously limited the political subjectivity of the society. Politics lost its natural character of a struggle for votes and turned into a battle over political and economic domination. The distinction between Russian politics and economy became vague and ambiguous. Pluralism was not characteristic of the Russian society and was seen, if anywhere, only among the conflicted social and economic elites. Vladimir Putin's election to the presidency put a stop to the oligarchy's spontaneous growth but not to the oligarchy itself. The fight against the oligarchy and corrupted elites became an important element in consolidation of the new regime in Russia. In this way Russian capitalism, or rather its elements which stayed beyond the direct control of the government, has contributed to establishing the Russian authoritarian regime. The current political and business elites are living their own life; they do not pay attention to the public, except when the society becomes the cause of "an increased concern". Although elections are conducted regularly, they do not provide opportunities for the transfer of power and serve only as a legitimization of the *status quo*. Creating a parallel political and economic reality, consisting of two completely separate worlds of the elites and the society, became a way to maintain control over the system.

Ownership transformations in Russia resulted in new economic structures, and thus contributed to the creation of many new interest groups associated with large business. Some of them represented a new financial group resulting from a systemic change (as well as from access to power), and part of them were old nomenclature lobbies generated from the former Soviet financial-economic groups.⁴ The game of interests of different kinds of "cartels" and their relationship with the authorities often decided the fate of individual politicians, the emergence and decline of large fortunes, and even to some extent the activity in the field of foreign policy.⁵ In the early nineties, Russia began the fight to take charge of the most lucrative sectors of the economy of the former Soviet Union and wanted to secure the profits from the new distribution of wealth. The fight was not determined by the free market, but by access to different levels of power. Every significant political force was associated with various economic and financial groups. Regardless of who

⁴ Igor Klamkin, Vladimir Lapkin, and Vladimir Pantin, "Mezhdue avtoritarizmom i demokratiei," *POLIS: Political Studies* No 2 (1995): 72.

⁵ Yakov Pappé, "Neftyayaya i gazovaya diplomatiya Rossii," *Pro et Contra* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer 1997).

seized the power, the system remained unchanged. It consisted of industry interest groups. Among them, the most important were financial and industrial lobbies, the media and groups related to raw materials. They were forming transitional alliances and fighting to access power and also the system of incentives and concessions. For instance, from 1990 until 1993 factions like "Agricultural Union" or "Industrial Association" were established and acted in the Russian quasi-parliament. That was one of the obstacles to the development of real pluralism. Deputies were seen more as representatives of the interests of corporations rather than the interests of the state or society.⁶ Interest groups gradually began to control the media, economy and politics. Vladimir Lepiechin argued that the Russian political system of the nineties was structured in a specific way and consisted of two parallel layers. At the top there were legal institutions and political organizations, whereas at the bottom lay illegal interests.⁷

American Diplomat Thomas Grecham was one of the first to point out that the Russian political system had never been democratic, authoritarian or re-elective. It became an "oligarchic-clan" organization.⁸

Grecham claimed that the post communist Russian society was unable to participate in political life. He assumed that the society was characterized by:

- gathering around well know political figures,
- free access to mass media,
- controlling the military and paramilitary service.⁹

1. YELSTIN AND HIS OLIGARCHS

The connection between political and financial elites played an active role throughout the entire period of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. Thanks to the mechanism provided by the constitution, the President often changed the personal configuration of the cabinet in order to adjust the candidates to his concepts of redistributing economic power. It is common to consider that the appointment of Czernomyrdin for the prime minister was the crucial moment in the process of penetration of politics by the financial elites. But on the other hand various lobbies began to form in the times of Jegora Gajdara's government.¹⁰ This was an incentive to the government's practice of paying for the support of different interests groups

⁶ Richard Sakva, "Rezhimnaya sistyema i grazhdanskoe obshchestvo v Rossii," *POLIS: Political Studies* No 1 (1997): 72-73.

⁷ Vladimir Lepekhin, "Gruppy interesov kak osnovnoï subyekt sovremennoï rossiïskoï politichyeskoï sistemy": 98-99; in: M. Markov, S. McFaul, and A. Ryabov, eds., *Formirovanie partiino-politichyeskoï sistemy v Rossii* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 1998).

⁸ Thomas Graham, "Novyï rossiïskii rezhim," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (November 23, 1995).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Yakov Pappe, "Otraslevye lobbi v pravitelstve Rossii (1992 - 1996)," *Pro et Contra* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1996): 62.

which was more important than the votes of the society.¹¹ Groups of economic and political interest were internally divided and that corresponded to the conflict that took place within the Russian political system.

In the mid-nineties the conflict between new holdings concentrated around banks and former lobbies connected to the administration, industry and natural raw materials was very well visible. Old groups dominated until around 1995. Later on - until the financial crisis of 1998 - new capital groups gradually gained a superior position. This was a result of "political simulation" (new groups that were connected to power) and development of the capital market in Russia. The economic crisis in the middle of 1998 led old lobbies - mainly administrative and connected with natural resources - to regain their influence. By 1996 a "balance of power" was established among the particular lobbies and each of them took its place in the executive power. The Russian government was dominated by three major economic centers that supported the interests of different groups. The first of these groups was the industrial group that gained the support of Oleg Soskowiec and Władimir Kadannikow. The second, financial group was supported by Anatolij Czubajs. Between them was the raw materials industry group backed up by prime minister Wiktor Czenomyrdin. The central authority (Kremlin) was monitoring the balance among these groups. The presidential election of 1996 caused a change to the economic forces and gave a predominant position to new economic groups around Czubajs.

Between 1995 and 1996 the oligarchs faced the need for obtaining power. While there was no doubt as to the candidate for the president, the "business" could not decide who would represent its interests in the Kremlin. Finally, the oligarchs supported Viktor Iliuszyn.¹² In this period the program of the Russian elites was determined by two imperatives. Firstly, everyone who was connected to the governing system depended on the elections. Secondly, Yeltsin's victory would strengthen those who had actively supported him. Yeltsin's victory could be considered the result of a compromise between the groups of oligarchs, but not a sovereign decision of the electorate.

After the presidential election in 1996 and after the denationalization of property followed the privatization of power. Financial capital was transformed into political capital.¹³ Then the phenomenon of the institutionalization of new interest groups could be noticed. The oligarchs began to seek a direct impact on power

¹¹ Siergiej Pavlenko, "Pravitelstvo reform u dotatsionnogo koryta," *Moskovskiye Novosti* (April 18, 1993).

¹² Vladimir Lepekhin, *supra* note 7: 120.

¹³ Borys Jelcyn, *Prezydencki maraton* (Warsaw: Politeja, 2001), p. 86.

because they were not satisfied with their position behind the scenes.¹⁴ When Putin was the Deputy Prime Minister, big sums of state money began to flow in his bank. Boris Bieriezowski became the deputy secretary of the Security Council, and later the executive secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Direct influence on the political authorities reorganized the secret services. Among the "oligarchs" who were fighting to take position near the source of power, Boris Bieriezowsky became particularly important. The most important for the development of his fortunes was the relationship with Yeltsin's surrounding players, mostly the president's daughter, Tatiana. The second very important "oligarch" was Gusinsky. In 1996 he actively participated in the presidential campaign of Yeltsin through his NTW television. These were the origins of his power and fortune.

Although large financial-industrial groups had big inspirations and strong connections with state policymakers, they never reached the full authority. Nevertheless, they had a significant impact on a number of policy decisions through a system of personal contacts. For example, in 1997, "Gazprom" executed its influences in order to avoid paying outstanding taxes. However, it must be noted that representatives of resource-energy lobbies were less visible in the politics than ordinary "oligarchs" and they were working behind the scenes. They fought for influence for their companies, rather than direct political power.¹⁵

It is impossible to deny the fact that mafia groups were present around the Kremlin. Yeltsin was aware of this situation. Nevertheless, he took no actions to alter it. It seemed that both groups, namely the president and the "oligarchs", intentionally tolerated the existence of a specific *status quo* between the state and business, as such a layout allowed them to control each other. These arrangements were considered optimal. The "oligarchs" supported the regime while the regime allowed them to control the resources of the state and operate on the illegal market. The elites were essentially shadows of public life.

2. THE BROKEN COMPROMISE AND NEW BALANCE OF POWER

In light of the upcoming new political events, such as the parliamentary election of 1999 and the presidential election of 2000, the business groups were needed again. Putin's success had not translated this time to profit for the "oligarchs". The presidential election can even be considered as the beginning of the end of vigorous political capitalism. The "oligarchs" failed at the outset because they were not able to insert someone from their circle. Putin's "election" had sense only assuming that his authority would be sufficiently limited by the "oligarchs".

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 86.

¹⁵ Borys Fedorov, *10 bezumnykh let* (Moscow: Sovershenno Sekretno, 1999), p. 213.

Specific *pacta conventa* were established in the second half of 1999. The essence of the agreement was to preserve the influence of political and business system created around Yeltsin. After Yeltsin's resignation the "oligarchs" were deprived of their political status. The phenomenon of the "oligarchs" as an interest group independent of the Kremlin had almost disappeared. Even before the March presidential election Putin announced that "all oligarchs will be equally removed from power". At that time it was considered a pre-election gesture. It turned out that the impunity was over. The Russian "oligarchs" lost the immunity that protected them when the former president was in power. In addition, they quickly began to lose their political positions and estates.¹⁶ In Moscow the opinion prevailed that when Putin came to power, new people – his former colleagues from the special services – would "split" the zone of influence. To review the results of the privatization that took place in the nineties was not an easy task.

For several months between 1999 and 2000 an alliance of the old and new teams seemed to last without a threat. The speech of one of the main players of Yeltsin's presidency, Bieriezowsky, was the first sign of impending division between Putin's and Yelstin's "old nomenclature", as he publicly criticized Putin's idea of reforming the Federation Council. Shortly after that he started an open war with the Kremlin. He accused Putin of building an authoritarian regime.¹⁷ In some way the media owned by Gusiński – especially the NTW television – were also against Putin. Ultimately, the confrontation ended with the complete success of the Kremlin, which took control over the media that opposed its authority – especially "Media-Most" and "ŁogoWAZ".

After the first attacks on the "oligarchs", Anatoly Czubajs convinced Putin that he should meet with the representatives of big capital as soon as possible in order to explain the rules of the game. His "emissary" – Niemcow – presented a list of twenty-four of the most powerful names in the Russian economy. The round table took place in the Kremlin at the end of July 2000.¹⁸ Putin did not agree to meet all the "oligarchs", especially Gusinsky and Bieriezowsky.¹⁹ He had already elaborated a specific plan to dismantle the system of uncoordinated and irresponsible "oligarchs" that was created in the times of Yeltsin, which was destroying the structure of the state and caused a dramatic weakening of the central government. The compromise between the government and business was not universal.

¹⁶ Angela Sukavova, Olga Tropkina, Yevgeniy Malzin, and Petr Orekhin, "Oligarkhi na pereputye. Soratniki ne toropiatsya podderzham Mikhaila Khodorkovskogo," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (October 28, 2003).

¹⁷ Vitaliy Tretiakov, "Goliat i levafan," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (June 1, 2000).

¹⁸ Lyudmila Romanova and Maryna Volkova, "Vlast pogovorila s dengami," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (July 29, 2000).

¹⁹ Lyudmila Romanova, "Kreml pristupayet k selektsionnomu otboru oligarkhov," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (July 25, 2000).

However, a break-through agreement such as was reached before the 1999 election could not be repeated. The "oligarch" powers were still needed. Business had to deal with the economy without obstacles from the state, but also without interference in politics.

Actions taken by the president were quite right. The image of Putin's activities in the fight against the "oligarchs" had one very important element: the fight against them did not affect businessmen closely linked to the Kremlin. Some of them were visibly favored in their relations with the authorities: in particular, those favored included the "oligarchs" associated with high officials of the Presidential Administration - Roman Abramowicz ("Sibnief" group), Alexander Mamut "treasurer of the Kremlin's family" ("MDM-Bank") and Peter Aven ("Alpha" group). This indicated that Putin did not oppose to the "oligarchs" as a group of rich people. Obstinate he was fighting with all independent political centers and all those who were too strong.

After the struggle with the political autonomy of the media empires of 2000-2001, the Kremlin slightly changed its policy towards representatives of big business. Those "oligarchs" who resigned from excessive political ambitions could count on the support of the government. The Kremlin began a policy of active support for the expansion of foreign corporations, mainly in the sectors of raw materials and defense industry. At the same time it sought to avoid unnecessary conflicts with big business and to expand the dialogue with the biggest entrepreneurs. In 2003, Putin was ready to make the final revaluation of the content of previous compromises and set new rules for big business in the authoritarian regime.

In the course of Putin's first term, the obstacles on the path to further economic transformation became visible.²⁰ The biggest obstacle was centralization of power which worked to satisfy interests of the bureaucracy. Furthermore there were many other factors, including psychological, legal, social and economic ones. It was a difficult time to undertake major reforms in a situation of relative stability, insecure property rights, great difference of the economic development of the regions and lack of consensus in the Russian political class. On the one hand there were positive trends in the Russian economy, and on the other those changes made the economy more dependent on resource-exporting sectors.²¹

²⁰ Lilia Shevtsova, *Putins's Russia* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), p. 329.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 329-331.

3. THE END OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF RUSSIAN "OLIGARCHS"

Before the elections of 2003/2004, the owners of oil holdings, Michal Khodorkowsky, the president of "Jukos", and Roman Abramowicz, who led "Sibnief" and "RusAl" (the aluminium industry), remained the greatest opponents. Their empires rose to be considered independent domains not submitted to control of any kind. An attack on the oligarchs was a direct consequence of the rules of the Russian political system. When Bieriezovsky and Gusinsky did not continue to participate in the Russian political scene it seemed that it had been clearly understood that the power indivisibly remained at the Kremlin while the oligarchs were only to maneuver the business. Any potential connection between the two – politics and business – could only take place with the Kremlin's approval and within the area strictly determined by the political authorities. The balance maintained in such a way was disturbed by Khodorkowsky's act of betrayal when he supported the opposition – the centre and the right wing of the Russian political scene. And, what is more, his actions were considered a sign of his growing interest in politics as he was also getting bored with business. In addition, he declared his withdrawal from business and leaned toward politics in 2008 – the year of the next presidential election which was likely to establish Putin's successor. That made him too influential and too dangerous.²² Khodorkowsky announced to the public that before the election of 2003 he would support the "Apple" party which was independent and strongly criticized the Kremlin's actions. One of his assistants claimed that he would have supported the party with a great amount of financial aid. On one hand it was common that business in Russia supported various political forces financially, but on the other hand never before had it been done officially. Putin reacted categorically. Firstly Lebediew – a close co-worker of Khodorkowsky – was arrested and then the Khodorkowsky's arrest followed. That could be considered the symbolic end of the apparent symbiosis of the authorities with the society. The upper proved that a totally new formation was being established at the very top of the power structure – "the platform of strengthener"²³ that aimed to eliminate from politics and business the people who used to be influential at the times of President Yeltsin, which as a consequence might have lead to the total takeover of power. This newly formed group consisted of Vice-Director of President's Wiktor Iwanow administration, attorney general Wiktor Ustinow, "Zbir" secretary Powel Borodin, president of "Mieżprombank" Siergieij Pugaczow and the corps of actual and former workers of Russian secret service. On March 24, 2005, the President of Russia

²² Ivan Rodin, Dimitriy Sumakin, and Vladimir Terletskiĭ, "Deputaty pytaiutsya dobit Iukos," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (July 15, 2003).

²³ Gleb Pavlovskii, "Stsyenarii èlyektoralnogo tsikla," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (September 3, 2003).

hosted at the Kremlin twenty-six representatives of big business and he appeased their disquiet as to the revision of the acts of privatization that took place in the nineties and informed them of the act of shortening the period of negative prescription in that respect from 10 to 3 years.²⁴ That allowed the businessmen to continue to prospect freely.

Khodorkowsky's trial proved that the Kremlin had the necessary capacity to destroy any of the oligarchs. It equally manifested the ability and will to execute it. Nothing more than complete and unconditional loyalty was required.

At the same time the "Jukos" case was followed by problems in the banking sector. The panic among bank clients caused a mass withdrawal of deposits from the two main private financial institutions: "Guta Bank" that was linked to Łużkow and "Alfa Bank". "Guta Bank" lost its financial liquidity and as a consequence was acquired by state-owned "Wniesztorbank". Meanwhile "Alfa Bank" suffered from financial losses and a crisis of confidence among its clients. It is very probable that that these difficulties were intentionally provoked by the Kremlin²⁵ as a "serious warning" addressed to big business.

Disruption and re-nationalization of "Jukos" did not put a definitive end to "oligarchic capitalism" in Russia. Rather, it seems that with the take-over of power a new political team attempted to re-shift the sphere of influence in the economy. This made any far-going change impossible. Actually, the division of the economy had remained unchanged except for the media. Russia was still ruled by the military and mining industry, with "Gazprom" playing the leading role, "Agroprom" representing the agriculture and few other huge industrial and financial groups that were connected to the Kremlin. Some of Putin's closest co-workers, so-called strengtheners, joined the business.

The 2007 elections had shown that the Kremlin was still using social reluctance towards oligarchs to consolidate the sphere of economics within its own political camp. This time, the oligarch-enemy number one became Mikhail Guceriw – the owner of the youngest oil company in Russia, "Russniet" (created in 2002). His trouble began when he bought oil deposits which had been owned by Jukos against the will of the Kremlin. Furthermore he did not accept the "unrefusable" offer to sell his company to Olegow Deripasce – a man closely connected to the Kremlin's regime. Wagit Alekpierow, the owner of the biggest private oil company in Russia – Łukoil, could be pointed out as another potential "enemy" of the regime. The process of taking over and redistributing the capital goods in Russia was far

²⁴ "Biznes i Vlast," *Izvestiya* (March 25, 2005).

²⁵ The President of the Federal Financial Monitoring Agency Żubkow informed that the banks which did not comply to the financial requirements referring the safety of the individual clients' investments would have had the license taken away. List of the banks that were facing such a threat was not precise, nevertheless it was speculated that such a threat is directed towards the two banks.

from being over and seemed to step into a new phase. Thus, Russian "oligarchies" continued to evolve.

As recent sociological surveys show, almost 60% of the Russian citizens still maintain the position that Russian privatization should be revised and that oligarchs should be deprived administratively of at least a part of their property. This makes a firm social foundation for Putin's war against "oligarchs" and – being the president – he has been using it quite often. To some degree it might be related to efforts of re-establishing the state's power in Russian strategic spheres of economy. "Oligarchs", who gained their wealth during Yelstin's presidency, were of course in favor of complete liberalization and privatization of national resources.²⁶ As owners of large capital they felt predestinated to have a significant influence on political and social changes.²⁷ Such a situation was not a result of their bad or misguided will but of the domination of the new specific capital ideology, according to which the state serves the "oligarchs", while they can refer to this issue more selectively. Paradoxically, the fact that the liquidation of the oligarch groups independent of the Kremlin – which was expected and supported by the society – deprived Russia of any remains of quasi-pluralism in politics and thus contributed to strengthening the quasi-authoritarian regime.

CONCLUSIONS

The final years of the Soviet Union were a desperate attempt to resolve the economic and social impasse then at hand and also a period of searching for new ways of legislation which would enable the efficient and least burdensome transition from a decaying totalitarian system to a strictly limited system of quasi-democracy. Replacement of the totalitarian state solution by imitative democratic institutions was a way of maintaining power by the elites. Analogous changes took place in the constitutions of the others republics and were pushed up by local leaders because elections for the President of the Republic gave them a real and independent political center of power. The problem is that Russians do not trust elites, and often consider them to be the main cause of their problems. Furthermore, it seems that this confidence is not present on the other side. Thus, the situation causes emerging trends among elites for 'management' and 'control'. Although, the authorities attempt to rebuild – with some success – the mutual trust, the disharmony lingers.

²⁶ Martha Brill Olcott, "Vladimir Putin i neftnianaya politika Rossii," *A New Working Paper in Russian* No. 1 (2005): 10.

²⁷ Lilia Shevtsova, *supra* note 10, p. 126-128.

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