

## THE POLICY OF THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT TOWARDS THE POLISH NATIONAL MINORITY IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

### ПОЛІТИКА РАДЯНСЬКИХ ОРГАНІВ ВЛАДИ ЩОДО ПОЛЬСЬКОЇ НАЦІОНАЛЬНОЇ МЕНШИНИ У 1920 – 1930-Х РОКАХ

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У статті проаналізовано основні причина та особливості політичного конфлікту між польською національною меншиною та владою у 1920–1930-х роках. Встановлено, що польська меншина була основою партій, що виступали проти більшовиків або змагалися з ними в боротьбі за владу під час революції, не поділяла ідеологію правлячої партії та займала активну політичну позицію. Крім того, протистояння більшовиків і польської меншини ускладнювалося існуванням національного питання, вирішення якого розглядалося з різних позицій. Ставлення радянської влади до поляків на початку 20-х років визначали складні стосунки Радянської України з Польщею. Все це відбувалося в умовах боротьби з інакодумцями в процесі побудови соціалістичного суспільства та радянізації населення всіх національностей, що проживали на території, захопленій більшовицькою Червоною Армією.

Виокремлено та описано три етапи політики більшовиків щодо польського населення: 1) кінець 1920–1923 років – встановлення контролю над життям поляків на Правобережній Україні взагалі та Поділля, зокрема; 2) 1923–1933 роки – створення мережі культурно-освітніх закладів, що стали центрами ідеологічної роботи з поляками, відмова більшовиків від пошуку компромісу і проведення політики радянізації; 3) 1933–1938 роки – ліквідація польських організацій, культурних закладів, засобів масової інформації (газет, журналів) і початок проведення масових репресій. Визначено основні проблеми у взаєминах між ними.

Особливу увагу в дослідженні зосереджено на поляках Поділля. Це пов'язано з тим, що політика радянських органів влади щодо польської національної меншини Поділля у 1920–1930-х роках мала свої особливості через прикордонне розташування регіону. Тому увага влади до національних меншин тут була особливо пильною та саме цей регіон став "полігоном" для випробування політичних заходів впливу.

**Ключові слова:** польська національна меншина, політичний конфлікт, політичні заходи впливу.

The article analyzes the main causes and features of the political conflict between the Polish national minority and the authorities in the 1920s and 1930s. It was established that the Polish minority was the basis of parties that opposed the Bolsheviks or competed with them in the struggle for power during the revolution, did not share the ideology of the ruling party and took an active political position. In addition, the confrontation between the Bolsheviks and the Polish minority was complicated by the existence of a national question, the solution of which was viewed from different angles. The attitude of the Soviet government towards the Poles of Podillya in the early 1920s determined the difficult relations between Soviet Ukraine and Poland. All this took place in the context of the struggle against dissidents in the process of building a socialist society and the Sovietization of the population of all nationalities living in the territory occupied by the Bolshevik Red Army.

Three stages of the Bolshevik policy towards the Polish population were singled out and described: 1) the end of 1920–1923 – the establishment of control over the life of Poles in Right-Bank Ukraine in general and in Podillya in particular; 2) 1923–1933 – creation of a network of cultural and educational institutions that became centers of ideological work with the Poles, the refusal of the Bolsheviks to find a compromise and pursue a policy of Sovietization; 3) 1933–1938 – liquidation of Polish organizations, cultural institutions, mass media (newspapers, magazines) and the beginning of mass repressions. The main problems in the relationship between them are identified.

The study focuses on the Poles of Podillya. This is due to the fact that the policy of the Soviet government towards the Polish national minority of Podillya in the 1920s and 1930s had its own peculiarities due to the border location of the region. Therefore, the authorities' attention to national minorities was particularly vigilant, and it was this region that became a "testing ground" for testing political measures of influence.

**Key words:** Polish minority, political conflict, political measures of influence.

**Introduction.** The problem of Ukrainian-Polish relations has been urgent for many years. The relations between the Ukrainians and the Poles had been developing according to the logic of the struggle for living space and beneficial boundaries in the interlacing of international and geopolitical interests. However, Poland was the first European country that recognized the declared independence of Ukraine. Since then Poland has been one of the most important lobbyist of Ukraine's integration into the Euro-

pean Union. Today, under the conditions of common threat, we have close targets. That's why it is necessary to deepen the cooperation in the political, economic and cultural spheres. But the political process in any country is full of contradictions. Conflicts are the essential components of social and political life, in fact, they are only one of the forms of intraspecific and interspecific struggle for existence, one of the mechanisms of natural selection, which forces us to open fully in the struggle against an opponent. The

current stage of society development is considered by many academics as a period of conflicts' escalation with the tendency to their increasing. Conflict management is considered to be one of the most important conditions for social and political stability within the country and on the international stage. Taking into consideration the fact, that the acutest conflicts take place in politics, the problem of political conflict is very important and requires further investigation and searching of new ways of solving. The experience of the 1920s can be very useful. At this time, the Bolsheviks tried to build a stable socially homogeneous society. Totalitarian regimes are characterized by the stability wherein the self-regulation is provided by repressions and violence aimed at eliminating of any existing or potential opposition.

**This article's main goal** is to analyze reasons and peculiarities of political the conflict between the Polish minority and the government. The latter refused to search the compromise and resorted to the policy of Sovietization that has led to the gradual increasing of severity during the analyzed period.

**Recent literature review.** A number of works are devoted to the problems of the Polish minority in Ukraine. So, the book "National minorities of Ukraine in the political processes of the XX–XXI centuries..." presents the results of research on the experience of formation, trends, problems and current challenges of scientific knowledge about the place and role of national minorities of Ukraine in the political processes of XX – XXI centuries, namely: a) early XX century, b) during the First World War, Ukrainian revolution and state formation, c) in the interwar period, d) during the Second World War, e) in the Ukrainian SSR 1945–1990, e) in modern Ukraine [8]. L. Hutsalo analyses tragical result of repressions and violent assimilation of polish population in the 1930s using the works of the ukrainian scientists and own researches of the author. To make the Polish population «Soviet» and the socialist in socio-economic aspect, the government attracted it to participate in the declared plan of building socialism [1]. P. Chernega, V. Fesenko are cover program principles, forms and methods of the national-cultural policy of the communist regime concerning the Polish ethnic minority in Ukraine from the 1920s – the middle of the 1930s. In particular, it analyzes the content, nature and consequences of the policy of rooting aimed at using the representatives of the Polish ethnic minority to preserve and establish Soviet power and to eliminate the sources and centers of the national liberation struggle of the Ukrainian people [18]. Some aspects of the functioning of the Jewish and Polish national minorities in Podillya were considered by L. Misinkevych [10], I. Mironova [9] and V. Nesterenko [12]. However, the policy of the Soviet government towards the Polish national minority in the 1920s and 1930s in Podillya need a separate analysis, as the region

was a border region, so the government's attention to national minorities was particularly vigilant.

**The main part of the article.** A political conflict is a clash, a confrontation of different socio-political forces and political subjects in their ambition for realizing their interests and goals related primarily to the struggle for gaining power and its redistribution, change of their political status and also to political prospects of society development. The subjects of the conflict are parties that have realized the contradictions and have chosen collision, struggle and competition as ways of conflict solution. This method of collisions' solution becomes mostly inevitable when it affects the interests and values of the interacting groups, under open infringement on resources, under the influence in the system of political relations, under the access to making generally valid decisions and under the monopoly of their interests and their recognition as socially necessary [7, p. 112].

The conflicts of totalitarian regimes are primarily characterized by status and role playing moments, they are related to the proximity or remoteness from the political power. The majority of real conflicts becomes hidden and gets latent character. The political conflicts in the totalitarian system are maximally ideological. The ideology becomes an indefeasible value that is above any criticism. The dissent is declared as a political offense. In view of above-mentioned facts the appearance of conflict between the Polish minority and the Bolsheviks was inevitable, because the Polish minority did not share the ideology of the ruling party in the 1920s, took an active political position and were the base of parties that stood against the Bolsheviks or competed with them in the struggle for power during the revolution. In addition, the confrontation between the Bolsheviks and the Polish minority in Ukraine was complicated by the existence of national question, the solution of which was seen from different perspectives [15; 16].

The attitude of the Soviet authorities towards the Poles of Podillia region in the early 20ies was determined by complex relationships of Soviet Ukraine with Poland. The events of the war in 1919-1920, especially the defeat of the Red Army near Warsaw in August, 1920, had great influence on the attitude of the Soviet regime towards the population of Polish origin in the early 20ies. Throughout the decade the Soviets always deteriorated anti-Russian moods. Poland was showed as an empire of evil incarnate, one of the strategic enemies of the USSR. The Soviet press, literature, movies, etc. supported the hostility to western neighbors and the Poles as a nation.

On the other hand, the Soviets did not abandon the ideas of expansion towards Poland in order to create the Polish Socialist Republic after lost the war. The Poles who lived on the bordering with Ukraine territory was seen as a fifth column for this mission. Ukrainian SSR was assigned the role of the

Polish national testing area for the implementation of this policy.

The Soviet experiment that involved the Polish population and the main goal of which was to build a new society with a new economic and political system, the guiding function of the Communist Party, the nurturing of a new society on the basis of an utopian communist theory, had started on the terrain of Dniepr Ukraine since 1921. The fundamental changing of all the spheres of human life from the spiritual to the material was set as a goal by the ideologists of communism.

Christian spiritual values and norms of behavior, such as: do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, respect your neighbor, honor and take care of parents and children and others, were replaced by communist – the fight against dissenters, hostility to another environment, the rejection of the alternative. The process of building a socialist society or Sovietization of population of all nationalities who had the misfortune to be on the territory seized by the Bolshevik Red Army began.

Three phases of the policies of the Bolsheviks towards the Polish population can be divided: 1. The end 1920–1923 – the main task of authorities was to establish control over the life of the Poles in Right Bank Ukraine. The mandatory registration of all Polish schools and libraries and repressive actions of the Catholic clergy in 1922, which rallied around all Polish cultural and educational processes, was designed to meet this purpose. 2. 1923–1933 – an extensive network of posts of illiteracy abolition, village reading rooms, libraries, clubs that on the one hand played a positive role in the abolition of illiteracy, became the centers of ideological work on the other hand. 3. 1933–1938 – the Bolsheviks set a course for liquidation of Polish organizations, cultural institutions, journals and began large-scale repressions.

The struggle between two tendencies was clearly seen in the cultural life of the Poles in Podillia region in 1920–1930ies. The first was official Soviet, which was intended to attract Polish ethnicity to “socialist construction” and the second was informal, quasi-legal, which was represented by Catholic priests, members of religious fraternities, who were trying to preserve traditional Polish ethnic culture. These two trends contradicted each other and the struggle between them passed through all the history of the Poles in Soviet Ukraine in the interwar period.

Almost all types of conflicts happened to be in the relation between the government and the Polish minority. If social conflicts can be of different types, the most important among political conflicts are the conflicts that are directly related to the distribution of scarce values in the society: power, material goods and social prestige. The conflicts of values, interests and identification are pointed out in the science dealing with policy. The conflict of values implies a clash of different value systems. Differences in values are one of the preconditions of conflict, and when they

go beyond a certain borders the conflict potential and pre-conflict situation appear. The confrontation between the party and the Polish minority was inevitable, because the latter aspired to general democratic principles that were contrary to the Bolsheviks’ desire to have a monopoly position in the political and ideological life. The totalitarian state tried to impose the values of collectivism, so there had started a struggle for the recognition of Soviet regime’s goals and interests as common by the majority of society. The Bolsheviks began to overcome the “counter-revolution in the minds” and a campaign against the dissidents started. Revolutionary tribunals, Extraordinary Commission on Counter-Revolution, Commissions on Political Purges Control and Implementation, Commissions on Emergency State and other emergency authorities were created in the early 1920s as an instrument of pressure on society. The Polish minority, as the spokesmen of public ideas and interest, fell primarily in the sphere of above-mentioned authorities’ activity [15; 16].

Firstly the atheist militant campaign was launched. This policy’s direction has been ineffective: the more party organs tried to separate the Poles from the Polish Roman Catholic church, the more adherent the Poles became. Polish people began to protect the Roman Catholic priests, protest against the closure of their churches. The most important religious holidays for the Poles were Christmas and Easter and especially on these dates on Sundays authorities appointed “voskresnyk” (voluntary Sunday work) and declared them to be working days. At schools among the children they held atheistic actions that insulted the feelings of believers.

Soviet authorities tried to get the political, socio-economic, cultural and educational life of the Poles under control from the very beginning of their governance. As it was mentioned in one of the reports of the Polish Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine, the main goal in 1921–1922 was “The Party’s influence penetration into the environment of Polish population in Ukraine”. The developed program of Polish proletarian culture creation contained the expansion of the network of Soviet Polish language schools, higher and secondary educational institutions with the aim of preparing national communist community, in this case – Polish, proletarian and rural clubs, Soviet libraries, village reading rooms, publishing of literature and press of communist orientation. The project of the implementation of the reform of Polish language that supposed functioning of the artificially invented language was being developed. For better accomplishment of this task, the creation of broad network of Polish Soviet schools, in the areas where Polish population lived, was planned [9].

A Polish Soviet school, as well as a Soviet school, was intended to nurture a “new man”, a fighter for the bright communist future of the whole mankind,

an implacable enemy of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois intellectuals, a man who had lost the skills of independent and critical thinking and assessing the reality, but who had acquired the habit of carrying out the directives of the Communist Party leaders [17].

239, 429 thousand persons of Polish nationality, including 31 672 in Podillia region, lived in Ukraine in 1924 according to the partial population census. In the 1920ies the schools for the Polish national minority began setting up at the rapid pace: if in 1923 there were 23 schools, in 1925 there were already [11]. At the very beginning, the newly created Polish schools were in very bad conditions. As a rule, they were created in peasant huts, often in one room. There also was a lack of highly-educated specialists with knowledge of Polish language. Polonization of education initially was carried out with the help of administrative methods. The governorate conference of the Polish schools teachers noticed very poor quality of educational work among the Poles in 1925 [4]. But in time the situation had improved. In the late 20ies Polish four class schools were functioning almost in all villages where there were big groups of Polish population. By 1935 studying there had been conducted mainly in Polish [12].

The main aims of the Soviet authorities towards Polish schools were emasculation of national and religious nature from the educational process and the school life in general, implementation of ephemeral Soviet substitute standards. Special attention was devoted by the Bolsheviks to the Polish teachers with the old ideology, making among them various discussions, meetings, and also very often they were replaced by the teachers who supported the Soviet authorities. Apart from the lack of textbooks, the process of korenization generated other serious problems. In the mid-1920's it became clear that weren't enough qualified teachers who have deep knowledge of national languages. The need of qualified personnel for work with ethnic minorities contributed to the development of the network of secondary and higher educational institutions, where training was conducted in the native language. Teachers' retraining was carried in Kamenets-Podilskyi Pedagogical Institute and Vinnytsia Pedagogical Institute. Special courses for teachers retraining for national schools were opened. A certain amount of places for these teachers was booked on general pedagogical courses. Proskuriv Polish Pedagogical Technical College started to work in 1932 [7].

Practical implementation of the korenization policy towards national minorities in Ukraine, including Podillia, had diversified forms and methods, especially in the part of cultural and educational work. The culture branch was observed as an ideological superstructure of the regime and as a strengthening mean of a new system. Therefore, the primary attention of the Soviet authorities was focused on the political and educational work among ethnic minorities: expansion

of the networks of village reading rooms, clubs, village houses, libraries, beautiful corners, etc. Their network, especially Polish, developed very quickly, although the material base was inadequate. So, according to official data, posts of illiteracy abolition were only on 30 – 50% provided with the necessary literature. The functioning of clubs and village houses was limited, as a rule by the existence of one or two clubs of amateur performances. Village reading rooms were hardly ever visited. Despite these drawbacks, the improvements in this area were quite visible. There were 2 Polish clubs, 21 village reading rooms and other institutions in 1926 [6]. Also the publishing of national newspapers started. At first they were simple inserts to the regional newspapers, including, for example, *Za sotsialistychne selo*. Vinnytsia oblast committee of the CP (b) U by its order dated March 5, 1933 found it reasonable to reorganize the Polish insert in Zaslavskyi region in a different publication. In such way *Sotsialistychna* newspaper edited by O. Vodzinskiy had appeared and had been existing for almost 5 years. The interesting and relevant information on the important issues of socio-economic, political and cultural development of Zaslavschyna constantly appeared in the newspaper. The fundamental position of the newspaper and its non-staff workers often caused conflicts with local authorities. The persecution facts of newspapers' village correspondents were noticed in Viytivtsi (now Zarichchia), Mala Radohoshcha and Mezhylistsy villages [11]. Libraries and village reading rooms subscribed such Polish newspapers as: *Serp*, *Glas Molodzeyhy* and *Glas Radzetski*.

Periodic reviews of cultural and educational institutions (for example, in 1930) markedly intensified national and cultural work. In the mid-20's regional history movement on the study of historical and cultural heritage of Polish community of the area became very active. Interesting information on this theme was published in the *Krayeznavstvo* magazine and in other publications [13].

Polish cultural institutions had played a significant role in abolition of illiteracy, engaging citizens in the cultural and educational process by the end of 1920s. The government, despite of all efforts, failed to significantly reduce the role of the Catholic Church, that continued to maintain a large impact on the social and cultural life of the Poles. The disrespect of the government to the religious feelings of the Poles, persecution for their religious beliefs was also observed in Podillia region. The party organizers sometimes even fenced schools off the churches in order to prevent the influence of Catholic Church on pupils, but they continued to escape from lessons and to visit acts of worship.

The research of the Poles' life in Ukraine was conducted the by Polish side. So, in Central Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw (AAN) various documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland were preserved. For instance, R. Nyiezbyzhytski, the secretary

of Polish Consulate General, after visiting Vinnytsia in 1927 made the following observations, which were outlined in the official diplomatic letter: “Polish language can be often heard on the streets, there is small number of representatives of Polish intellectuals, and that who remained, are doing all their best to move to Poland; there are many Polish villages around Proskuriv whose inhabitants are fighting for the preservation of Roman Catholic churches. Constant Communist pressure is generated on the population, which is trying to keep its Polish authenticity” [17].

The processes of forced collectivization accompanied by the increasing of negative tendencies in cultural and educational spheres began in 1929. Mass repressions against Catholic priests and closing of Catholic churches led to the destruction or self-destruction of most Catholic religious communities. The lists of anti-Soviet books, which were subject of immediate withdrawal, were sent to all Polish libraries in Right-Bank Ukraine. The works of famous writer and Nobel Prize winner for literature H. Sienkiewicz, for instance, were among these lists.

The Soviet authorities' attitude to Polish cultural life changed dramatically. The evidence of this is the statement of the Soviet government made in 1930 that “strengthening of national opportunism among the Poles that is found partly in the theory of impossibility of building of Polish proletarian culture in the Soviet Union without connection with Poland”.

The gradual compulsory closure of Polish institutions that led to the decrease of Polish public life and national culture started in the 1930ies with the establishment totalitarian and dictatorial regime. State policy towards national minorities had changed dramatically with the establishment of totalitarian and repressive regime in the USSR. The deterioration of the relations between the USSR, Germany and Poland and the corresponding strengthening of anti-German propaganda campaign that caused special bias of the Soviet authorities to German and Polish population was one of the main reasons.

The attitude to Polish schools changed radically in the context of these events in early 1930ies. The letter of the CC CP (b) U “On the border districts' professionals purge” dated May 15, 1930, that appeared marked as “Top Secret” and was signed by P. Liubchenko and M. Khvyliya triggered this process off. There was noted that the purge from anti-Soviet elements must be done in Shepetivka district. All categories of professionals, who had relatives abroad, especially in the near abroad, first of all in Poland and Romania, were subjected to it. The development of Shepetivka fortified area construction, which was carried out in the area densely inhabited by the Poles, Czechs, Germans (Bilotyn – Miakoty – Storonychi – Shekeryntsi) became the reason for the first wave of repressions. The resolution of the CC CP (b) U “On the border zone strengthening”, the main declared task of which

was strengthening of purges, especially among the Poles, appeared on January 12, 1932. Zaslavskiy, Pluzhnianskyi and Antoninskyi regions were considered to be especially dirty. Similar purges fevered national institutions and caused the loss of personnel. At the same time there appeared attempts to close national schools [12].

On December 20, 1935, Political Bureau of the CC CP(b)U approved a decree that noted the presence “national schools, artificially created by Polish nationalists” in the republic. A number of decrees (Postanova TsK KP(b)U..., 1933), which put an end to the existence to Polish educational institutions' in Ukraine, changing the education firstly into Ukrainian, and later into Russian, were approved during 1933-1938. Educational and cultural institutions, including homes of Polish culture in Vinnytsia and Proskuriv were closed down. The main motivation of these decisions was that they “didn't have necessary cohort for their existence” [2].

Polish regional periodicals were accused of propaganda of nationalism ideas. Because of this, the Secretariat of the CC CP (b) U adopted a resolution “On the reorganization of regional Polish newspapers' network” on February 1, 1935. According to this resolution, the publishing of such newspapers, as: Kolektyvist Pohranychchia, Shturmovyk Nadzbruchanskyi in Horodotskyi region and Komunar Pohranychchia in Volochyskyi region, was stopped by the decree of Proskuriv district committee of CP (b) U dated September 1, 1935. M. Popov and V. Balytskyi got special orders and they engaged “to replace all nationalist- teachers in Polish schools and Polish sets in Ukrainian schools with the Soviet teachers” [3]. As a result, Ukraine had lost Polish traditions and Polish institutions of cultural and social life. Polish bookstores, publishing houses, cafes, clubs and even Polish spoken language disappeared from the streets.

A number of criminal cases against the Poles were framed up in the 1930ies. The greatest resonance had the case of Polish Military Organization. Among the prisoners – V. Pakulskyi, the Assistant Head of a Polish school in Vinnytsia, P. Titov – the director of the Polish Pedagogical Technical School and others. They were accused of committing the wrecking on the national-cultural front: they educated youth in the national spirit and polonized Ukrainian schools. In total, 103 employees of Polish schools were unjustly attracted to liability in such cases. Ya. Sosnovich, the head editor of Serp newspaper, M. Hruda, S. Rybnytskyi, the heads of its departments and many other members of Polish regional newspapers suffered from the repressive machinery in 1935.

The Soviet legislation liquidated last Polish schools, cultural and educational centers, village reading rooms in 1938-1939. They performed their task in the integration of Polish community into so-called “socialist construction” and from the point

of view of the Soviet authorities their further existence was inappropriate. The studies and researches of that time documents lead to the interesting conclusions about the formation of a new Soviet lifestyle, trying to nurture a new type of a person who is no longer able to think but acts only according to the instructions of the Communist Party's leaders, repeating hawkish slogans. The double standards, formal and informal understanding of events and the world appeared at that time in the 20's. The classification on good and bad, according to which everything Soviet was considered as something good, and everything else was bad and didn't have right for living. The last one had to be destroyed and a new lifestyle had to be imposed to workers all over the world. The archival documents and memorandums, marked as "Top Secret", addressed to the CC CP (b) U testify the real life, problems and worries of Polish population in Dnieper Ukraine. This is the part of meetings and conferences' materials, that were not included into the official reports, and especially these materials provide truthful information. In particular intelligencers layed information that Polish farmers in Loshkivtsi village in Solobkovetskyi region of Kamenets-Podilskyi province said: "It would be good to send a Catholic priest, who would tell the truth about the Soviet Union to Congress". Catholic

priest Bredytskyi in Kytaihorod made a counterrevolutionary speech in which the Soviet Union was compared with a fading tree. He proposed to send their delegates to Warsaw for telling the truth about life in the USSR [17].

Thus, national and cultural life of Polish minority in Podillia was under very difficult conditions. In the 1920ies the destruction of Polish identity was made by reasonable methods. The existence of educational and cultural institutions of national character was allowed and publishing of newspapers in Polish language was encouraged. In the 1930ies the situation dramatically changed: the wave of mass repressions covered the Poles.

**Conclusions.** Thus, the conflict between the Polish minority and the government was inevitable, as all vertical conflicts arise as the result of social comparison, when the group compares its' present situation with better one in past. In this case, the situation of overwhelming majority of the Polish minority has dramatically changed for the worse in comparison with the pre-revolutionary period with the coming of Soviet government: financial support got worse, basic and additional work increased against almost total rightlessness. The latent, concealed form of the conflict is its' peculiarity under the conditions of constantly increasing pressure of the totalitarian state.

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