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NEW EU STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA: BARRIERS FOR ITS SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

The European Union (EU) continues the line of cooperation with Central Asia. The 2007 strategy envisioned cooperation in areas ranging from environmental and energy to security, human rights and the rule of law. It was accepted for a ten-year term and it was replaced by another strategy with a small delay 12 years later. The new EU strategy for Central Asia, adopted in 2019, is an updated version of the 2007 strategy. This 2007 version was sharply criticized, on the one hand, due to the lack of clear goals, and on the other hand, because of the seemingly important, but in fact, marginal topics from the point of view of the Central Asian countries. The EU was criticized for its weak foreign policy, indecision and prioritization of secondary issues not only from outside, but also by member states. There is no doubt that the new Strategy has been supplemented and new areas of cooperation have been added. Nevertheless, to our minds, there are some inhibiting factors that interfere with the full success of the Strategy. Thus, the article focuses not on the success or the most positive aspects of the EU new Strategy for CA, but on defining the obstacles for its full development.

Key words: Central Asia, cooperation, EU, strategy studies, security

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ЕО-тың Орталық Азияға арналған жаңа стратегиясы: оны табысты жүзеге асырудағы кедергілер

Еуропалық Одақ (ЕО) Орталық Азиямен ынтымақтастық желісін жалғастыруда. 2007 жылғы стратегия қоршаған орта мен энергетикадан қауіпсіздікке, адам құқықтары мен заң үстемдігіне дейінгі салалардағы ынтымақтастықты көздеді. Ол он жылдық мерзімге қабылданып, 12 жылдан кейін сәл кідіріспен басқа стратегиямен ауыстырылды. 2019 жылы қабылданған ЕО-тың Орталық Азияға арналған жаңа стратегиясы 2007 жылғы стратегияның жаңартылған нұсқасы болып табылады. Бұл 2007 жылғы нұсқа, бір жағынан, нақты мақсаттардың жоқтығынан, екіншіден, Орталық Азия елдері тұрғысынан маңызды болып көрінгенімен, шын мәнінде маргиналды тақырыптарға байланысты қатты сынға ұшырады. ЕО әлсіз сыртқы саясаты, шешімсіздік және екінші дәрежелі мәселелердің басымдылығы үшін тек сырттан ғана емес, мүше мемлекеттер тарапынан да сынға ұшырады. Жаңа Стратегия толықтырылып, ынтымақтастықтың жаңа бағыттары қосылғаны сөзсіз. Соған қарамастан, біздің ойымызша, Стратегияның толық сәтті жүзеге асуына кедергі келтіретін кейбір тежеуші факторлар бар. Осылайша, мақала ЕО-тың Орталық Азияға арналған жаңа Стратегиясының сәттілігі немесе ең оң аспектілеріне емес, оның толыққанды дамуына кедергілерді анықтауға бағытталған.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, ынтымақтастық, ЕО, стратегиялық зерттеулер, қауіпсіздік

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Новая стратегия ЕС для Центральной Азии: препятствия на пути ее успешной реализации

Европейский Союз (ЕС) продолжает линию сотрудничества с Центральной Азией. Стратегия 2007 года предусматривала сотрудничество в самых разных областях – от окружающей среды и энергетики до безопасности, прав человека и верховенства закона. Она была принята на десятилетний срок, а спустя 12 лет с небольшой задержкой была заменена другой стратегией.

Новая стратегия ЕС для Центральной Азии, принятая в 2019 году, представляет собой обновленную версию стратегии 2007 года. Эта версия 2007 года подверглась резкой критике, с одной стороны, из-за отсутствия четких целей, а с другой – из-за кажущихся важными, но на самом деле маргинальных тем с точки зрения стран Центральной Азии. ЕС критиковали за слабую внешнюю политику, нерешительность и приоритетность второстепенных вопросов не только извне, но и странами-членами. Несомненно, новая Стратегия дополнена и добавлены новые направления сотрудничества. Тем не менее, на наш взгляд, есть некоторые сдерживающие факторы, которые мешают полному успеху Стратегии. Таким образом, в статье делается акцент не на успехе или наиболее положительных аспектах новой Стратегии ЕС для ЦА, а на определении препятствий для ее полноценного развития.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, сотрудничество, ЕС, стратегические исследования, безопасность

Introduction

After some years of negotiations, the EU approved a new strategy for Central Asia. The process was extremely difficult due to the number of actors involved. The EU is not a supranational structure, so they have to discuss the text between the (then) 28 member states, between the EU institutions and later among all of them; in parallel, the text was discussed also with all the five Central Asian partners. Here, the role of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is crucial. This High Representative (HR) is at the same time Vice President (VP) of the European Commission (the executive branch of the EU). In this case, Federica Mogherini (VP/HR) proposed and boosted a text, which was prepared with her collaborators, among them Peter Burian, the then EU Special Representative for Central Asia.

After prolonged discussions, the European Council (also known as just “the Council”), which is the summit of Heads of State and Government of the member states, adopted the Conclusions on the new EU Strategy for Central Asia on June 17th, 2019. What the Council did in that moment was only to endorse the Joint Communication of the VP/HR Mogherini and the European Commission entitled “The EU and Central Asia: New opportunities for a closer partnership”. That text, together with another document, the 7 pages Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia (approved on June 17th, 2019), form the new strategic framework for EU engagement with Central Asian countries in the coming years. The new strategy focuses on building resilience, prosperity and regional cooperation with Central Asia.

Later, on Sunday, July 7th, 2019, a Ministerial Meeting was celebrated in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), with the EU VP/HR and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Central Asian countries. In that meeting, the new Strategy was accepted by them,

which meant the starting point of the strategy. After the meeting, they published a joint communiqué, where the participants reaffirmed their commitment to forge a strong partnership in Central Asia and the mutual interests between the two regions.

In parallel, the EU and some Central Asian countries were negotiating new Partnership Agreements under the banner “Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement” (EPCA). The first one was concluded and signed in 2015 with Kazakhstan, but entered officially into force in March 2020, after the process of ratification by all 28 member states was completed; as the process was foreseen too long, they accepted a temporary entering into force (the so called “provisional application” started in May 2016). On July 6th, 2019 the EU and the Kyrgyz Republic agreed in Bishkek an EPCA. Negotiations with Uzbekistan are still ongoing, but it seems that it will be successfully. The EU opened also negotiations with Tajikistan. The situation with Turkmenistan is harder, but they are open to negotiate if that means European investment in their country.

The success of the first phase of regional cooperation has been mixed. More successful has been the creation of a formal framework for dialogue and cooperation. These are, in particular, the annual meetings of the EU and Central Asian countries at the ministerial level. The last one was the 17th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting, gathered in Dushanbe in November 2021. This Meeting has become a platform for the regular coordination of cooperation and clarification of its parameters, along with the permanent EU-Central Asia Dialogue on Human Rights –a forum for raising and discussing issues related to human rights in the region. The EU’s efforts to help Central Asian countries to improve their border control systems have also been quite successful.

In the framework of the 17th Ministerial Meeting, the VP/HR Josep Borrell said: “The countries of

Central Asia have made remarkable achievements since their independence 30 years ago. The EU has high stakes in seeing Central Asia develop as a more resilient, prosperous and more closely interconnected economic and political space. The EU and Central Asia share a strong commitment to intensify cooperation to build back better following COVID-19. We also want to step up joint efforts to manage some of the common challenges stemming from the situation in Afghanistan. The EU can make a strong contribution to the future of the region if Central Asian states show determination in their commitment to reform and democracy.”

In the same Meeting, the Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, added: “The partnership between the EU and Central Asia builds a joint path to a green, resilient, inclusive and sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery. We want to strengthen cooperation on climate, connectivity, trade and investment, energy, and security. And we will engage with civil society and the youth, to develop a closer partnership.” (17th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting – Turning Challenges into Opportunities press release, 2021)

In these two paragraphs it is easy to identify what are the key EU interests in CA.

For European policy, «Central Asia is becoming more interesting as a growing market with great potential for trade and investment, as well as, given its strategically important geographical position, remains a connecting link between Asia and Europe. These elements should be used in partnership between the countries of the region and the EU,” noted Peter Burian. Introducing the updated Strategy in Astana in February 2018, he stressed that “the EU has no hidden agenda and geopolitical ambitions. Our main interest in Central Asia is security and stability. We are ready to cooperate with everyone who is genuinely interested in stability and prosperity of Central Asia.»

Therefore, in the new strategy, Central Asia is named as a key region in the interaction between East and West, and the overall goal of the EU is related to the concept of economic and political sustainability. Central Asia has been declared as a region of strategic EU interests in terms of security, stability, governance and diversification of energy resources. At the same time, EU officials continue to justify strengthening their positions in Central Asia by the fact that they ambitiously call the Union a “key partner” of the countries of the region in solving problems of the environment, the rule of law, internal reforms (*id est*, good governance and democracy), and border control. The EU

recognizes the need to support young people as well as develop regional cooperation. The areas of interaction are the same as those identified in the early strategies: transport, energy, digital networks that enhance interconnection between countries, as well as cooperation between civil societies of countries.

According to Peter Burian, “the depth of relations with individual Central Asian countries will develop and depend on the ambition and need of the Central Asian countries in promoting bilateral relations. If there is more interest, there will be more response from our side. In this direction, the EU will use more flexible formats and collaborative mechanisms to achieve more concrete results.” (I. Sevostyanova, 2015)

All EU strategies are linked with the aim of forming common principles for solving problems in the areas of security, energy, transport and the digital network. By now it has become obvious that the EU has achieved the greatest success in cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and to some extent with Uzbekistan. The EU is interested in solving security and energy problems in cooperation with these states, and at the same time it automatically opposes the deepening of integration processes in the post-Soviet space.

We have to admit that the success of the Strategy depends on various factors. As the former EU VP/HR Federica Mogherini emphasized, the EU believes in the potential of the region, and the new strategy is based on joint work, and not on the interests of the EU alone. Therefore, the EU expects the governments of the Central Asian countries to refer to the experience of the EU, and above all to the EU standards in various fields. (EEAS press, 2019)

In addition, Peter Burian while comparing the European connectivity project and other similar projects promoted by other countries highlighted several times: “We also share a mutual interest in developing and strengthening connections between Europe and Central Asia, whether that is transport links, digital infrastructure, energy networks, or contacts between people. This could create new jobs, promote innovation and modernization, which allows Central Asia avoiding the debt trap and the trap of poor-quality projects. But at the same time the connectivity for us is not and should never be about creating spheres of influence. For us, connectivity always will be rather focused on creating opportunities for everyone.” (Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, 2019)

Regarding policies, projects and programs of the EU in the Central Asian region, there are some factors that may hinder the success of the Strategy and the influence of the EU in Central Asia in general. Obviously, the EU cannot afford systematic advancement and a large-scale presence where both Russia and China are already active. In addition, it is evident that the historical gravitation of these countries towards Russia and China hinders the advancement of the EU in the region (Alonso Marcos, Antonio, 2021)

In addition, personnel changes in the EU itself will not change the established principles of cooperation between the parties, while the EU is not ready to invest significant amounts in interaction with the region.

To our minds, above mentioned facts could be one of the factors that may interfere with the success of European penetration to Central Asian region and the realization of the European Strategy in this region. Therefore, the article will focus on identifying these factors.

Mentality or cultural difference as another factor

The new EU Strategy for Central Asia proposes strengthening the EU-region's partnership in economic development ("prosperity"), comprehensive security ("resilience") and enhanced cooperation with and within Central Asia. It is obvious that the European understanding of the norms and values of connectivity cannot be readily accepted in the region, in part because of the inherited problems of the Soviet past that led to a dramatic break in ties, and because of clan struggle that quickly took root in the region. Moreover, deep and entrenched networks of corruption impede sustainable economic development, support criminal and terrorist networks, and damage confidence-building initiatives between and within Central Asian states. It is difficult to solve these problems, since the state actors are themselves part of the problem. In part because of this fact, the EU is trying to strengthen its engagement with non-state actors in Central Asia. It is clear, however, that the road to economic success cannot be fast: the region has significant growth potential, but human rights, the rule of law and transparency need to be strengthened to attract more European investors. (Sinikukka Saari, 2019)

Aidar Alibayev, deputy chairman of the United Social Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, told about the dominance of clan relations in the power structures, when officials even in official biographies indicate their involvement in one clan or another. "If

you look closely at the lists of heads of departments of ministries and departments, you will see that there are completely familiar names! These are the children of current parliament members who are in power and retired akims (mayors), ministers and heads of national companies.

Independently of each other, both opposition politician Aidar Alibayev and human rights activist Galym Ageleuov point out that the fight against corruption observed in Kazakhstan is in fact a manifestation of the struggle of various political clans for the most advantageous places on the power Olympus. "Vivid examples of such a struggle are the punishment of former Prime Minister Serik Akhmetov and the fate of the former head of the presidential administration Aslan Musin. They are not at all alone, there were influential clans behind each! The same Musin soared very high 10 years ago. He also influenced all life spheres of our officials. Ones said that he was even one step away from the most important seat in the country. But the struggle of clans has not been canceled in our country," said Aydar Alibayev, who in the past served as head of the Association of Pension Funds of Kazakhstan and worked in the Ministry of Labor and social relationships. (A. Weisskopf, 2020)

Another aspect of the EU's contribution is precisely what is often uncomfortable for other external partners: the EU's ability to raise regulatory questions. They relate to social justice, gender equality, human and civil rights, democratization and the rule of law, among others. The European Union's raising of these issues will be warmly welcomed by many non-governmental stakeholders, civil society organizations, youth groups and some political parties and movements. Regional governments may not be enthusiastic about this; however, they may show some interest, especially when such cooperation is accompanied by tangible financial support or technical assistance programs. (E. Dzhuraev, 2020)

Obviously, the EU institutions are aware of the importance of continuing to cooperate with these countries while respecting their sovereignty. However, European countries would undoubtedly like to have more influence here. They would prefer to get more contracts with local governments or state-owned companies. In addition, they would like to find real like-minded people there with similar views on democracy and human rights. However, the real political culture and public opinion / mentality of the peoples of Central Asia is rooted in Turkic-Persian-Arab and Russian-Soviet influence; therefore local companies and governmental structures run in this

old style, although there are some slow changes are occurring. (Antonio Alonso Marcos, The new EU Strategy for Central Asia one year later: fears and wishes, 2021)

Competition for influence in the region among other external actors

First, we have to point out that EU is not the only external actor in Central Asia. There is a long historical competition among big and middle powers to exercise influence in the region. It is essential to note that neighboring powers have always viewed the region as the target of their territorial expansion. Countries such as Russia, China and even Turkey considered it to be their sphere of influence. Russia coveted control over the Great Silk Road crossing this region and wished to expand its Tsarist Empire until the border with the British India; that's why, they started the process of the so-called "russification", the cultural and military expansion in the 1800s, which lasted until the Soviet era (V.Shvedovsky, 2016)

In the 1990's, the USA was interested in this area to counter the vacuum of power provoked by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and also for security reasons (mainly, Afghanistan) and for its natural resources. Since the beginning of the 21st century China expressed its interest on this area for possible economic growth and logistics purposes.

Of course, lack of historical knowledge and geopolitical factor can be considered as one of the barriers for the successful implementation of the EU Strategy. For instance, given the conditions in the region, fetishizing democracy in traditional clan states destroys the EU's possibilities, instead of fostering them. In addition, decision-makers in the region actually tend to cooperate with partners, who do not seek for democratic infrastructure and foundations (like China).

The Russian and Chinese sides have achieved significant success in Central Asia. In addition, one cannot ignore the economic ties of these countries with Russia and the dependence of the GDP of individual Central Asian countries on remittances from labor migrants who work there.

For this reason, in the new strategy, the EU is focusing on humanitarian projects –primarily educational programs, as well as security issues, linking its cooperation with Central Asian states with the improvement of the situation in Afghanistan. The EU realizes that competition in the region is not in its favor, it does not have advantages, but hopes to use soft power tools. At the same time, the new EU strategy does not take into account the positions of China and Russia,

and does not offer joint approaches. (N.Eremina, 2019)

EU's financial investments to Central Asia

It seems that the EU is not ready to invest significant sums in interaction with the region. The EU provided the region with approximately \$ 1.2 billion in free aid between 2014 and 2020. However, following a strategy update in 2019 to strengthen political dialogue and expand cooperation on rule of law and education, environment and water resources, the EU's financial investment in Central Asia has changed. "These financial resources were provided at a time when the EU faced the consequences of the global financial crisis. This is the best evidence of the EU's strong commitment to security, stability and prosperity in Central Asia – the key objectives of our strategy," said Peter Burian. (A.Yergaliyeva, 2020)

China's trade with the region has grown tenfold since 2000, and has invested about US \$ 25 billion there since 2013; Beijing is already the main trading partner of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but at the regional level it ranks second after the EU with 20% of foreign trade, followed by Russia (just under 20%). Moreover, funding is likely to grow again in 2021-2027, if the European Commission's proposal to raise total funding for its external action across the globe by 30% is approved. (M.Russell,2019)

However, economic reform and trade development seem like empty promises until the real needs of countries become clear. For example, Kazakhstan cannot be compared with Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan cannot be compared with Uzbekistan. There are huge differences in the economic structures of countries, economic policies, and even in economic philosophy. The first step is to identify areas that can be beneficial for EU companies, namely those that open up investment opportunities, boost trade and reduce risks. Why is the Astana International Financial Center (AIFC), which aims to become the region's financial center with significant international support, not mentioned in the EU Strategy? AIFC was founded within the "Kazakhstan 2050" program, initiated by President Nazarbayev for the 2017 EXPO in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), with the aim of transforming the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to be the financial center of Central Asia, the Caucasus, West-China and Mongolia by integrating innovative financial technologies. Moreover, China has invested € 22.5 billion in the Central Asian part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2017, while the EU invested only € 1 billion. In terms of foreign trade, China has

become one of the largest partners of Central Asia. (László Vasa, 2020)

Ineffective tools or EU's obscure prioritization

On December 7th, 2020, the EU Council adopted the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. It was one of the serious EU actions against Human Rights violations. According to it: 1) There is no geographic reference, which implies the possibility of imposing sanctions for violations of Human Rights committed anywhere, even outside the EU; and 2) Sanctions can be imposed on both citizens and state and non-state structures. At the same time, it is difficult to say to what extent the EU will be ready to apply these instruments of influence in relation to the Central Asian countries, on the one hand, and to what extent the latter are ready to improve their observance of human rights, especially political ones, in order to avoid such a possible impact, on the other hand.

In addition, the EU itself, in the context of the implementation of both the previous and the new strategies, does not have a clear prioritization and relationship between different directions of its policy towards Central Asia and within the framework of bilateral interaction with each of the countries of this region. These states, in turn, due to the specifics of the development of each of them, have no interest in jointly defining and promoting any common standards in the field of democracy and human rights. (A.Chebotyrev 2021: 118-119)

Conclusion

As the Central Asian countries try to comply with EU / international norms to obtain preferences, the rate of their receipt remains very low. When EU VP/HR Catherine Ashton said that more than just soft power is required for Europe to be a reliable player in the world, she spoke about the need for a military (hard) power. (EDA Annual Conference: key quotes)

However, actually the EU power is not just a soft power, but it is a normative one. This is because Europe itself is based on the norms that the EU wants to promote, starting from the *acquis Communautaire*. This *acquis* has to be accepted by any candidate country, but also to deepen their relationship with partners. Moreover, while candidates and neighbors are very interested in bringing their legislation in line with EU norms, other countries, including Central Asian countries, need an extra motivation to be more interested in adopting EU values.

Despite the fact that Central Asia is not considered a neighboring region, the EU is trying to extend its rules and set their standards here too.

The new EU Strategy for Central Asia emphasizes the importance of new generation of bilateral Enhanced Partnerships and Agreements (EPCAs) that contribute to legislative convergence as a cornerstone of EU engagement in the region (Joint communication to the European parliament and the council, 2019) The EU Council's conclusions on the new strategy also highlight the EPCA, stressing that the scale of EU relations is linked to the willingness of individual Central Asian countries to reform and strengthen democracy, human rights, rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as to modernize and diversify the economy (Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia).

The most important instrument in strengthening the EU's interaction with these countries was the annual meetings of the EU representatives and the governments of the Central Asian countries, as well as various programs with a humanitarian emphasis. On July 7-8, 2019, such a regional meeting was held in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). It was there that the new EU strategy for Central Asia was officially presented. At the same time, the analysis of this document shows that the EU is not so much ready to step up its activities in the region, but rather focuses on general global and geopolitical changes that must be taken advantage of and that must be taken into account in strengthening the partnership.

The success of EU Strategy of 2007 was mixed. Overall, there has been only marginal progress towards achieving the goals set by the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia. Highlights include the establishment of closer diplomatic relations at the highest level and the opening of EU Delegations throughout the region, including the long-awaited opening of a new EU Delegation in the capital of Turkmenistan in 2019. The EU also successfully conducts annual human rights dialogues in the area of human rights in all five Central Asian republics, which is an important and unique platform for promoting human rights in the region. (M.Russell, 2019)

The implementation of the strategy influenced the intensity of a number of programs and initiatives carried out by the European Commission and individual EU member states in Central Asia and aimed at addressing various development issues in the region. Among those it should be noted:

- Central Asia Border Security Initiative (CABSI)
- Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA)
- Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP)

- Rule of Law in Central Asia Initiative
 - Central Asia Invest Program
 - Central Asia Sustainable Energy Program (CASEP)
 - EU Water Initiative for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia
 - Central Asian Science and Education Network
 - Central Asian education platform
 - Program of action 2 Erasmus Mundus
- (A.Chebityrev 2021: 10)

In the new EU Strategy of 2019, some new issues have come to the fore, while others have lost their relevance as such, and the differences between the two strategies reflect these changes. An important topic is “connectivity”: in this area the EU would like to establish clearer rules in Central Asia. Another difference is the emphasis on an inclusive approach to collaboration. Inclusiveness implies that cooperation is open for all countries in the region, as well as for other non-state actors.

However, there are some factors that may hinder for the full success of the new Strategy, such as unwillingness to invest significant sums, a great competition for influence among the countries of middle and big powers could serve as one of the factors. In addition, the bright difference between the cultures serves as a barrier for better joint work and cooperation. Of course, the EU is confident that Central Asia needs changes. The region needs new models of economic development and economic diversification. Specifically, we are talking

about developing the private sector, improving the investment climate, reducing inequality and accelerating the transition to a green, waste-free economy, etc. However, for EU to inculcate European standards in the Central Asian region where the rates of corruption are high and the level of democracy is low is going to be hard. Therefore, the framework for EU relations with the region depends on “the willingness of individual Central Asian countries to carry out reforms, strengthen democracy, human rights, rule of law and judicial independence, and modernize and diversify the economy.”

Moreover, as the head of the EU Delegation to Kazakhstan, Aurelia Bouchez, notes that the further development of Central Asia and relations with the countries of this region is recognized as one of the key areas of the EU policy. On the other hand, she admitted that the EU and the countries of Central Asia do not know each other very well and not all proposals and projects of the European Union are accepted in the region. At the same time, according to Bouchez, Central Asia increases its position on the world agenda. Therefore, the European Union will continue to develop its policy in the region through, in particular, attracting here direct foreign investment. According to Bouchez, the EU will adapt to the changing environment and is ready to act as a source of various proposals. It is also important for the EU to avoid dividing lines in relations with the countries of the region.

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