

Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy in Central Europe: Between a Political Campaign and a Business Project

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the concept of vaccine diplomacy, the article analyses Russia's efforts to promote its Sputnik V vaccine and the repercussions this had in two Central European EU member states which authorized the use of the Russian vaccine. The authors argue that for Russia, Sputnik V promotion was significant both as a business project and as a political enterprise, as it was supposed to enhance Russia's international status and help it in overcoming its post-Crimea isolation from the West. The results were mixed, however, as Russia's international credibility had been undermined by its previous policies. Thus, in Hungary the vaccine managed to gain some traction thanks to a government that preferred importing non-EU certified vaccines as part of its larger policy of fostering closer ties with the authoritarian great powers in Eurasia. In Slovakia, the vaccine deal with Russia caused a political crisis but eventually resulted in a very poor performance of Sputnik V as compared to EU-certified vaccines.

KEYWORDS

biopolitics, COVID-19, Hungary, Russia, Slovakia, Sputnik, vaccines

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COVID-19 has significantly affected the vocabulary of international relations and foreign policy analysis, including the concept of diplomacy. The pandemic has drastically re-actualized the scholarly attention to 'vaccine diplomacy', a concept that might be discussed from two different perspectives.

One way of approaching vaccine diplomacy is to look at it as a subset of health diplomacy that initially was understood as a multilateral international *"aid or cooperation meant to promote health or that uses health programming to promote non-health-related foreign aims"* (FAZAL 2020: E78). As seen from this viewpoint, the key goals of vaccine diplomacy are explicitly global, as they include equitable distribution of vaccines in the world, countering anti-vaccination narratives, international cooperation between otherwise rival powers (such as the USSR and the USA during the Cold War) and alleviation of tensions between them. Within this explanatory framework, roles of private corporations in funding vaccine research and global organizations – such as the Global Alliance of Vaccines and Immunization, or Gavi – are key (HOTEZ 2021).

Another perspective sees vaccine diplomacy as a component of biodiplomacy, a concept that explicates how biological research and commercial activities become parts of health emergency management. Biodiplomacy *"extends to the strategy by which governments, private groups, and individuals influence the attitudes and opinions of other peoples and governments to create domestic and foreign policy concerning biological materials, equipment, and facilities"* (SUTTON 2013). This interpretation embraces a broad spectrum of issues requiring international cooperation that are related to technological and scientific progress in saving and improving people's lives, particularly in such areas as environmental protection (BIOPOLITICS INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION 2016), agriculture, biodiversity, and counter-epidemic policies (JUMA 2005). Biodiplomacy may connote a type of biopolitical management that is *"exercised upon a foreign population"* (CONSTANTINO AND OPONDO 2019, 12). In a general sense, biopolitics connotes governance of life and populations. More specifically, in this article we refer to two dimensions of the concept, both grounded in a nexus of sovereignty and biopower. One involves the governance of life and populations in a conflictual zone of competition and rivalry between major actors looking for supremacy in world politics. Under these conditions, sovereign qualities of Russian power, boosted by

biopolitical investments in vaccine diplomacy, pave the way to global leadership. The other dimension points to the ability of a sovereign power to promote biodiplomacy in general and vaccine diplomacy in particular, and by so doing, to financially capitalize on the market demand for vaccines.

Both perspectives on vaccine diplomacy place a heavy emphasis on its structural characteristics and particularly on its contributions to constructive multilateral interaction among vaccine-producing nations and their recipients (VARSHNEY AND PRASANNA 2021); in the most optimistic interpretation vaccine diplomacy is seen as a major element of global health governance. What is less studied is how individual states profit from vaccine diplomacy as a soft power instrument, a nation (re)branding tool, or a source of financial revenues. It was only recently that researchers found out that vaccine diplomacies of illiberal governments, such as China or Russia, may diverge from the globalist expectations and contradict the liberal internationalist reading of health diplomacy in a wider sense (LEE 2021).

Against this backdrop, in this article we discuss how Russia's vaccine diplomacy affects this country's relations with Slovakia and Hungary, two Central European countries, former members of the Moscow-patronized socialist bloc and, nowadays, EU members that allowed the use of Sputnik V. Our research shows that Russian vaccine diplomacy is effectuated by a group of new actors who previously were not known for their participation in international affairs. This network is based on earlier experiences of promoting Russia's technological achievements by the state, accompanied by previous engagements with soft power diplomacy. This Sputnik-promoting coalition serves the double purpose of sustaining the Kremlin's political agenda and profiting from the market capitalization of the Russian vaccine. On the one hand, Russia wishes to position itself on the side of both scientific and market rationality against the (geo)politics that is ascribed to Western powers. Yet on the other hand, the logic of political distinction and contestation of the West is an inherent part of Russian vaccine diplomacy.

VACCINE DIPLOMACY IN THE RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOOLKIT

To further conceptualize the notion of vaccine diplomacy, we need to scrutinize the aims that Russia pursues in the international arena through

promoting Sputnik V. Two of them are of particular relevance: one claims the alleged efficacy of Russian sovereign power, while the second one points to Russia's market competitiveness.

The first aim is explicitly political and based upon a presumption that the pandemic brings meaningful structural changes in the world scene, both in the international agenda and in the functioning of institutions. This approach particularly resonates with the covid-related vision of biopolitics among Russian policy analysts. Most of the Russian authors who use this concept with direct references to Agamben interpret biopower as an exceptional type of power that “*rejects laws*” (POGONYAILO 2020: 670). This argument is transformed into a claim that Russia nowadays is facing not a geopolitical confrontation with the West, but rather a new biopolitical challenge that stems from cynical and inhuman policies of global pharmaceutical companies and producers of health care technologies (KRAMARENKO 2020). Consequently, biopolitics is discussed in close conjunction with the concept of biological security (KUMINOVA 2020: 97–98).

In the long run some Russian authors expect that Russia might contribute to making global biopolitics less Western-centric (KRAVCHENKO 2020: 100). As seen from this perspective, the global state of emergency has confirmed some major Russian foreign policy tenets: the crisis of liberal globalization, the validity of national sovereignties, and the broad space for unilateralism (TIMOFEEV ET AL. 2020). With these assumptions in mind, Moscow's political goal is to prevent a return to normative and value-based structures of international relations, and therefore to blur the lines between liberal and illiberal regimes, as well as between democracies and non-democracies. The Western liberal order therefore, in the eyes of Moscow, does not have competitive advantages over illiberal regimes when it comes to the life protection function. This strategy set a basis for the Russian vaccine diplomacy, from the humanitarian yet militarized missions in Italy and Serbia in spring 2020 to the robust promotion of Sputnik V. By engaging with vaccine diplomacy, Russia means to diminish the importance of the liberal international agenda of democracy and human rights, and to show that it is more effective than liberal states when reacting to medical emergencies, and therefore it is needed as a partner. The Sputnik V project comes from the centrality of visibility, recognition and respect as core political concepts defining Moscow's standing in vaccine diplomacy.

The global race for an anti-coronavirus vaccine gave Moscow an opportunity to modify the structure of its relations with the West, as it moved away from normative and legal issues (such as the annexation of Crimea, or the poisoning and incarceration of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny) to a pragmatic, business-like, and transactional approach. It is at this point that the second aim of Russian health diplomacy becomes apparent: the discourse on “medical sovereignty” (understood as the self-sufficiency and efficiency of Russian medical infrastructure and expertise in fighting the pandemic) transforms into a discourse fostering Russia’s global competitiveness as a major vaccine producer in the world. This shift confirms that Russia is not only a sovereign power, but it also relies on the global market. In this context, Sputnik V might be metaphorically compared with “a new oil” for Russia, a source of material profit and revenue: it is financial calculations (expecting, according to some estimates, to get about 25 percent of the global vaccination market) that largely drive Russia’s campaign for promoting Sputnik V. The Russian producers and funders of the Sputnik V project, supported by the officialdom, are engaging in competition for market shares on a global scale. As some experts estimate, in 2021–2022 Russia can earn up to 30 billion USD by selling vaccines to other countries, which is twice as much as the Russian annual revenues from arms sales, and almost as much as the annual revenues from gas exports (REGNUM 2021).

The global campaign for Sputnik V was coordinated by the Russian state, and can be seen as an extension of the previously well-articulated interpretation of sovereignty as Russia’s competitive advantage, including the state support for major business projects. To outrace foreign competitors, the Russian government took the risk of registering Sputnik V on the basis of a relatively small number of tests. President Putin has directly spoken in support of the Russian vaccine on multiple occasions (TASS 2021), and did not hide his irritation with the reluctance of the European Medicine Agency to accept Sputnik V. Within this logic, Russian politicians and opinion makers explained the problems with the registration of Sputnik V in Europe by pointing to “fears of competition”, which, in their view, only proved its quality.

In the meantime, the promotion (apart from the promotion by Russian governmental institutions), advertisement and co-production

of Sputnik V have substantially expanded the Russian health diplomacy, which integrated a group of other actors – state corporations and financial institutions (such as Sberbank), professional associations (for example, the Russian Association of Pharmaceutical Producers), market agencies, and the media. Among the key stakeholders are the vaccine producer the Gamaleya National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology that functions as a research hub and a medical institution, and the Russian Foundation of Direct Investments (RFDI), a state corporation that provided financial means for the Sputnik V project.

The picture of vaccine diplomacy is two-fold: it is entangled with both market logics and a geopolitical reasoning. The nexus between vaccine diplomacy and the market is well illustrated by Nina Kandelaki, the head of the RFDI healthcare projects, who has claimed that it is “*rules of the industry rather than vaccine diplomacy*” that matter the most in this regard (RUSSIAN HOUSE IN BRUSSELS 2021). One of the examples of a practical implementation of this approach was a memorandum on cooperation signed in December 2020 by RFDI and AstraZeneca. The online event was attended by Vladimir Putin, who particularly underscored that this type of interaction is a practical implementation of recommendations given by the UN, the WHO and the then recent G20 summit (YOUTUBE 2020B). In the words of the RFDI director Kirill Dmitriev, the memorandum is an important step in the international recognition of Sputnik V, and opens perspectives for the Russian vaccine to become part of AstraZeneca products in international markets (YOUTUBE 2020C). However, the Russian officialdom – in particular, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov – rebuffed vaccine diplomacy as a Western concept (VEDOMOSTI 2021) and denied its applicability for Russia. Apart from market considerations, the mainstream discourse is heavily embedded in the traditions of Russian messianism (KUSHNIR 2019) and treats the Sputnik V promotional campaign as a humanitarian project grounded in the culture of responsiveness, compared to the Western mode of vaccine diplomacy as a geopolitical project aimed at eliminating Russia as a strong competitor in global markets (NOVOE POKOLENIE 2021). An illustrative example of the messianic approach to promoting Sputnik V beyond Russia is the “History of the Fatherland” Fund of the Russian Historical Society, a quasi-nongovernmental organization chaired and patronized by Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. The Fund has developed a virtual project called “On Behalf of Humankind,” which

is devoted to the 130-year anniversary of the Gamaleya Institute and advertised by the Russian House in Brussels. In the words of Konstantin Mogilevsky, the director of the Fund, historical experience is a powerful factor that legitimizes Russia's leadership in virology and epidemiology and proves that *"Russia was never isolated from the world; on the contrary, it was driven by a sense of its mission"* (RUSSIAN HOUSE IN BRUSSELS 2021).

The state efforts to expand the global horizons for Sputnik V were accompanied and sustained by the enthusiastic coverage of the Russian vaccine by a whole bunch of broadcasters and media outlets in one way or another associated with the Kremlin. According to the widely propagated media narrative, dozens of countries prefer Sputnik V over "Western" vaccines in spite of US pressure or EU hesitation (RT 2021B). Russia portrays itself as a potential savior, or a normalizer of Europe (RT 2021C). Visualized stories of an Italian politician who got jabbed in Moscow and a French advocate who lambasted "the criminal negligence" of the French medical infrastructure (YOUTUBE 2021) were extended into an appeal to save lives as the top priority for European policy makers, and a concomitant campaign for "opening borders for Sputnik V" in Europe (RT 2021D). The Austrian chancellor's "successful phone call to Putin", along the lines of this narrative, secured a certain amount of needful vaccines for this country (RT 2021E). For countries with Islamic traditions, Sputnik V was advertised as being allowed for all Muslims in the world (RT 2021F). According to one opinion, the origins of the Russian strategy were not commercial, as was the case with *Pfizer* or *Moderna*, but more related to soft power projection (KULISH 2021). A good example at this point is Russia's initiative to offer Sputnik V to all football fans attending the European championship games in St. Petersburg and Moscow in summer 2021 (RT 2021A).

Most of the pro-Kremlin TV channels depicted the above mentioned memorandum between RFDI and AstraZeneca as a Russian response to a plea for help that came from the producers of the "Oxford vaccine," whose efficacy rates, according to Russian sources, are lower in comparison to Sputnik V (YOUTUBE 2020D). The Russia-proposed combination of two vaccines was largely interpreted as a demonstration of the advantages of Sputnik V over the "European" (or "Anglo-Swedish," as it is often referred to in the Russian media) vaccine.

The role of the media in the Russian vaccine diplomacy raised other controversies. One good example is the vaccine tourism initiative that originated from the networked efforts of the Russian Federation of Restaurateurs and Hoteliers (EXPERT 2021), the Union of Shopping Malls and the Public Movement of Entrepreneurs (VEDOMOSTI 2021), and was supported by the Russian Association of Medical Tourism (GXP NEWS 2021), the State Duma Committee on Physical Culture, Sports, Tourism and Youth Affairs, and the All-Russian People's Front (DW 2021). International medical travel is a widely spread form of trans-border mobility that might be explained by such reasons as the institutional failure of the home state to provide health care services, or desires of various diasporic groups to receive medical treatment in their countries of origin (WHITTAKER – LENG 2016: 296). However, in Russia this initially practical idea was politicized due to its disproportionate coverage by a plethora of mainstream TV channels. Russian journalists created numerous stories about masses of foreigners who came to Russia for vaccination, but the reality check shows that most such tourists were Russian citizens living abroad, members of mixed (part Russian) families, or seasonal workers from some post-Soviet countries. Fact-checking with independent sources indicated that there were only a few tourists from Germany who went to Russia for vaccination (TORMANTSEVA 2021). Some Russian tourist companies lobbied for opening vaccination stations in airports' transfer zones, yet did not get approval for that from the Russian Healthcare Ministry, and the idea also remained a media story.

The communicative components of the pro-Sputnik campaign appear to be vulnerable to criticism from outside. As seen from the perspective of some Western observers, the Kremlin has created a network of individuals and groups that run disinformation attacks against Western vaccine producers, aiming to discredit them. A series of media reports published in May 2021 pointed to a network of Russian marketing companies known for selling nutritional supplements that allegedly was behind a disinformation campaign to denigrate Western coronavirus vaccines. According to a journalist investigation, this network includes an organization called Russian Initiative, and three marketing firms called Fazze, AdNow and 2WTrade (KRUTOV ET AL. 2021), along with News Front, a multi-media outlet based in Crimea.

Therefore, what Russia considers a legitimate and effective vaccine diplomacy might often be viewed from a different angle – it could be viewed as a series of intrusive and unethical actions aimed at exaggerating the gravity of the side effects of the competing vaccines and questioning their efficacy. This skeptical reasoning may be based on a generally low level of trust in Russian statistics, including in the medical sphere, as well as on the previous disinformation campaigns against many countries launched with direct or indirect support from the Russian state. This conflict of interpretations boils down to the issues of legitimacy and illegitimacy of foreign policy actions, and adds another inextricable dimension of politicization to vaccine diplomacy.

REPERCUSSIONS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

As of 2021 there were two countries in the EU that authorized the use of Russia's vaccine whilst it was not certified by the European Medical Agency (EMA). The repercussions of Russia's vaccine diplomacy were, however, very different in them, depending on the specific cultural and political context. In Hungary PM Viktor Orbán's promotion of "Eastern" vaccines (Sputnik V and the Chinese Sinopharm) followed up on his foreign policy of the "Eastern opening," a pragmatic (or opportunistic) philosophy according to which Hungary should develop closer ties with the authoritarian great powers in Eurasia. This approach went hand in hand with the ruling party's incessant criticism of the EU and *liberal* democracy as a model that the West was allegedly imposing on Hungary (SEE BUZOGÁNY 2017; CSEHI – ZGUT 2020; KAZHARSKI – MACALOVÁ 2020). Orbán himself set a public example by getting vaccinated with Sinopharm. The government also undertook efforts to try to convince the population that "*the Russian and Chinese vaccines are more effective than the ones produced in the West*" (HUNGARIAN SPECTRUM 2021A). By the summer of 2021, this "unique vaccination strategy" resulted in what the government claimed was a million Hungarians having been vaccinated with Sputnik V (in a country with roughly nine and a half million people) (BAYNAZAROV 2021).

Russia and Hungary also opened talks on a strategic cooperation on vaccine production. On the other hand, Russia's vaccine diplomacy did not bring it an exclusive influence; Sputnik V had to compete with both Sinopharm and Western vaccines certified by the EMA. However, as the

number of non-EMA-certified vaccines was high, there were rising concerns about Hungarians' freedom of movement inside the EU (INOTAI 2021). Additionally, the national vaccine authorization policy also had to be visibly politicized and "de-Europeanized" through the new changes in the rules of emergency use of vaccines. Previously, a vaccine *could* be approved by the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition (OGYÉI) if it had been previously approved in an EU or a European Economic Area (EEA) state. The new decree changed the law to the effect that now the OGYEI *would* (unconditionally) approve it if it was being used in any three states, one of which had to be an EU member state *or a candidate* country (MAGYAR KÖZLÖNY 2021). In practice this meant that the authorization could be outsourced to non-EU member states like Serbia, where non-EU-authorized vaccines have also been used, and the government's prior political decision to use Chinese and Russian imports could now be legalized. Critics lamented that with that step, Hungary had practically "*left the European Union*" as far as authorization procedures were concerned (HUNGARIAN SPECTRUM 2021B).

In Slovakia, owing to a different, more pluralistic political environment, the events unfolded less favourably for Sputnik V. On the one hand there were some initial expectations that the Russian vaccine may be accepted more favourably by some segments of the population, owing to a certain tradition of Russophilia in the country. Some politicians made claims that nearly half a million Slovaks (in a country of five million) were ready to get the Russian jab, and also that, in many cases, it would help in fighting the anti-vaxxer syndrome, as some citizens (around 11%) would *only* trust the Russian vaccine, but not the Western ones (KUBALOVÁ 2021).

Prime Minister Igor Matovič's trip to Moscow and a secret deal of purchasing two million Sputnik V stocks for Slovakia caused a ruling coalition crisis and ultimately cost him his job. The public debate grew increasingly controversial as Slovakia's State Institute for Drug Control (ŠÚKL) published a statement to the effect that the imported Sputnik was not identical with the samples which were tested for a study previously published by the renowned medical journal *The Lancet* (FOLENTOVÁ 2021). In an unprecedented attempt to interfere with the freedom of the Slovak media, RFDI subsequently threatened the newspaper *Denník N* with legal action, demanding that it take down the story which quoted the statement of the government drug agency (FOLENTOVÁ – TOMEK 2021). In the end, Slovakia

allowed vaccination with Sputnik V but the whole affair turned out to be “much ado about nothing.” As of July, only a little over fifteen thousand Slovaks were registered for their first or second Sputnik V jab (BUCH 2021). As for the unused stocks, arrangements were being considered for them to be returned to Russia or donated/sold to other countries.

As the case of Hungary demonstrates, the Russian vaccine diplomacy was facilitated by Orbán’s strategy of “Eastern opening”, an opportunistic (cf. “multivector”) policy of building ties with Eurasian authoritarian regimes, as well as by the systemic criticism of the West/the EU (including criticism for their alleged “crisis mismanagement” during the pandemic) in the Fidesz discourse. The Hungarian government emphasized the benefits of (and preference for) “Eastern vaccines”. This type of health diplomacy was a partial success for Sputnik V: 1.8 million Hungarians were vaccinated with it, thus putting it in the third place behind Sinopharm and Pfizer in terms of numbers of vaccinated people as of June 2021.

In Slovakia there was a more pluralist environment in this respect, yet still with a traditionally pro-Russian (pan-Slavist) segment of society that generated high expectations for Sputnik V, as exemplified by the discourse stating that “500,000 Slovaks want Sputnik V, not Western vaccines” (BUTOROVÁ 2021). Some political actors made pro-Sputnik moves which led to a strong political outfall, including the resignation of the prime minister. However, a very low interest in Sputnik was ultimately registered: 8,108 / 7,573 people were vaccinated with it as of July 1, 2021.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the two available examples, our analysis demonstrated how vaccine diplomacy resonates with states’ existing political cultures and previous discourses, including their relations with Moscow. The topic is naturally connected to broader international relations debates. Many of them pertain to the issue of Russia’s global status after the Cold War (LO 2002) and its propensity to other and rival the West on many symbolic levels while presenting itself as an “alternative” (RINGMAR 2002; NEUMANN 1996; 2017), as well as to the Russian (mis)understanding and (mis)appropriation of “soft power” (WILSON 2015). Immediately related to this are the questions of the scope of Russia’s influence in its former external empire and the factors thereof,

including the growing significance of biopower ^(MAKARYCHEV – YATSYK 2017; BRAGHIROLI – MAKARYCHEV 2018), along with biodiplomacy and health diplomacy as its derivatives. Examining Russia's recent vaccine diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe strikes all these chords. The symbolism of "Sputnik" for both the domestic and the international audiences, clearly alludes to the past triumphs of the Soviet technological development and the space race with the United States, signalling a claim to an *alternative* modernity that aspires to be on par with the Western one. Russia thus takes the Covid crisis as an opportunity to restore and enhance its international status and overcome its post-Crimea isolation. Furthermore, the particular soft power instrument it chooses in this case is meant to address the foreign publics directly with a possibility of bypassing supranational regulations, norms and platforms, as it targets the very biological existence of these populations. However, this exercise in soft power is a two-way street, and to a significant extent, its success depends on Russia's previous ability to wield soft power, and the overall level of credibility and trust that is linked to its present international image.

The two examined cases allow for several interesting observations with respect to the nature of Russian vaccine diplomacy and its implementation in the two countries of post-Communist Central Europe. First, the relative success of Sputnik V in Hungary does suggest a form of biodiplomacy, especially as vaccine choice could be shaped by simple availability. In some cases, saying no to Sputnik V, in practice, would have meant having to remain unvaccinated and being exposed to additional risks until a Western vaccine became available. Much of its success thus had to do with the approach adopted by the government. Here, the local political elites served as transmitters of Russia's vaccine diplomacy, and their approach clearly followed up on the previous foreign policy strategies of the "Eastern opening." A side effect here was the additional risks to the freedom of movement of Hungarian citizens and a degree of "de-Europeanization" as Hungary refused to uphold a common regime with the absolute majority of the EU member states, which had decided to wait for Sputnik V's EMA certification before approving its use. From Moscow's point of view this could also be counted as a success insofar as it sees sowing dissent in the EU as one of its foreign policy instruments.

In Slovakia, however, despite some initial expectations, the local political elites behaved very differently. Both the generally cautious approach towards the Russian vaccine and the scandalous incident with RFDI trying to meddle in the domestic debate and intimidate the independent media, showed the traditional limits of Russian *soft power*. Russia's massive promotion campaign did fall short of overcoming its overall lack of credibility and trust, which is created by Russia's previous course of action, and which is a typical problem for Russian soft power projection. What the vaccine diplomacy did manage to do, however, was to produce a domestic political fallout and create chaos in the unstable ruling coalition, which came close to falling apart and had to be saved by a job swap between the prime minister and the minister of finance. Hence, despite the partial success in terms of promoting Sputnik V, Russia fell short of being a genuine technological and soft power alternative, and remained more of a spoiler power which was more prone to creating problems than helping to solve them.

Based on this study we can conclude that vaccine diplomacy is to remain a sphere of competitive rather than cooperative relations. For such illiberal countries as Russia it is the nexus of sovereignty and biopolitics that is seen as a warranty for both politically distinguishing them from the West and earning financial resources in the global vaccine market. However, vaccine diplomacy may fall victim to mismanagement and bad governance, from low quality control to disruption of supplies, which puts into question the sustainability of Russia's long-term policies.

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