

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - “‘Rule Of Law,’ ‘Freedom,’ And ‘Democracy’: Domestic And International Building Blocks Of Contemporary Russian Political Ideology”

Abstract: We analyze the definitional arguments of Vladimir Putin relative to the terms ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘rule of law.’ We examine the definitional relationships among these terms in Putin’s rhetoric, with a focus on “rule of law.” We look at primary appeals targeting domestic Russian audiences as well as Putin’s message to the American people on possible US air strikes against Syria, looking for the definitional construction of rule of law in the discourse.

Keywords: Putin, Russia, democracy, freedom, rule of law, argument by definition, rhetorical choices, translation

1. Introduction

Periods of national transition are, by definition, times of change. Sometimes that change is sought, driven by a desire to move to a different place or time. When that happens, change is guided by a rhetorical and argumentative transformation of needs and desires. Although material conditions are clearly part of the equation producing national change, the interpretation of those conditions is at least as important. As Zarfesky (1997) notes,

Although some of the political science literature still mistakenly regards problems as empirical conditions to be found, a growing number of writers recognize that they are categories to be created.

He continues, “*To define a condition as a problem is to invoke a frame of reference within which the condition is assessed, causality and blame are determined, and solutions are considered*” (1997, p. 6).

Change, in other words, is directed through definition of the situation. Burke approaches this in different language, suggesting the labels and descriptions of

situations must 'encompass' those situations in ways that coherently account for the diverse elements evident in the situation (Burke, 1973, p. 109). Periods of national transition typically highlight themes/grounds related to national identity, in addition to those that concern more tangible or material components of the 'problem' defined in the situation; this requisite element of national identity brings both rhetorical opportunities and constraints to those advancing arguments either for or against specific changes.

In this paper, we sketch our approach to understanding definitional argument in periods of national transition. We discuss definitions of situation, considerations involved in definition of key terms, current approaches to definitional argument, and critical procedures for interpreting definitions of situation. We then analyze the presidential discourse in Vladimir Putin's third term as President, looking specifically at how the terms 'Rule of Law,' 'Freedom,' and 'Democracy' become redefined through argument by definition.

2. Argument by definition

Definitions of situation constitute personal and public motives for actions. Arising out of symbolic interaction theory, the theory presupposes the understanding that "Human behavior is based upon the *meaning* the person attaches to objects, events, relationships, or activities of other individuals" (Cox, 198-199. Emphasis added). Or, as Burke puts it, much our "reality" is but an extension of our terms that, according to Burke, select, reflect, and deflect. All interpretations are therefore necessarily partial and contestable (Burke, 1966, pp. 45-46). At the public level, factors affecting the viability of competing definitions of a situation include:

- * the adequacy of the definition to encompass the situation;
- * the resonance of the definition both with widely shared cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs and with the underlying historical memories; and
- * the invention of acceptable analogies between the current situation and previous national or cultural experiences.

Definition of situation "*refers to both individual interpretations as well as 'culturally... shared perceptions and interpretations of situations considered identical or similar...'*" (Cox, 1981, p. 199, citing Gould and Kolb).

Definitions of situations are constructed from language - that is, from words.

Collectively, these words form definitions that are salient to the context and can adequately encompass it. The collective definition – that is, the meaning of a definition of a situation – transcends the meaning of the individual words in the sense that the ‘interanimation’ of those meanings creates a broader, higher order of meaning that is not reducible to the unitary meanings of each term (Richards, 1936, pp. 47-66). Yet the definition of the situation is in the most literal sense a collection of individual words. Occasionally, some of the terms in a definition of a situation may be neologisms, but even then the other terms will have conventional meanings (some clearly more ambiguous than others); and if the definition of the situation is to obtain resonance with the public, key terms must carry historical weight. In constructing a definition of a situation, political actors may redefine the individual terms employed in the definition even before it is constructed; moreover, by putting individual terms in relation to each other, the ‘interanimation’ among the terms has the effect of redefining the terms in that particular context.

In our analysis of definitions of individual terms, we are guided in part by work on both ‘persuasive definition’ and ideographs. The concept of a persuasive definition comes from Stevenson, who emphasized that terms have both descriptive and emotive meanings (Walton, 2001, p. 118). Drawing upon the work of Ogden and Richards, “descriptive meaning” is understood as “the core factual or descriptive content of a word, while the ‘emotive meaning’ represents the feelings or attitudes (positive or negative) that the use of the word suggests” (Walton, 2001, p. 118). Stevenson’s theory is that a persuasive definition works “by redefining the descriptive meaning of the word while retaining its old familiar emotive meaning” (Walton, 2001, p. 118). We embed our application of persuasive definition in our consideration of ideographs, a concept advanced by McGee (1980).

An ideograph is a one-term summation of an ideological commitment (e.g., ‘democracy’). These are common words that carry historic freight in a given culture: they have a history of significant usage in the culture, and the public has become conditioned to respond more-or-less automatically to the words (but not necessarily to any particular meaning for the words) (McGee, 1980). In the U.S., words such as ‘freedom,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘rule of law’ are examples of ideographs to which the automatic response is favorable: the public is for ‘freedom,’ for ‘democracy,’ etc. Conversely, words such as ‘tyranny’ or

'communism' are words that generate automatic opposition. In each of these examples, the precise "descriptive meaning" of the words is ambiguous, and there is great range in historical usage of what the term may mean - a diachronic panoply of significant applications of the term. Despite, or perhaps because of, descriptive ambiguities, these are the words from which ideology is constructed; they are the "building blocks of ideology" (McGee, 1980, p. 7). The legitimacy of a particular ideological construction at a given point in time (which McGee calls the synchronic structure of the ideology) is bolstered by selective appropriation of historical instances in which the ideographs align with the descriptive meaning of the term as it is used in the synchronic construction.

Although concerns with the relationships between definition and argument have been evident since the classical period, the domain of definitional argument is less developed than other aspects of argumentation theory. In an important keynote address to the 1997 Alta Conference on argumentation, Zarefsky (1997) maintained not simply that definitions are important in argumentation (although he did do that, citing among other sources his own self-described aphorism, "The power to persuade is, in large measure, the power to define"), but also that definitional argument may take multiple forms, which he identified as argument *from* definition, *about* definition, and *by* definition.

The distinctions among these forms of definitional argument are important: *argument from definition* proceeds in a deductive form, with the definition taken as an essential or true premise. As many examples demonstrate, argument from definition tends toward "stalemate" because advocates and opponents simply reject the definition, the foundational premise, offered by the other side (Zarefsky, 1997, p. 4). *Argument about definition* tends toward a similar fate. Citing Schiappa, Zarefsky suggests that arguments about definition, that is, arguments about the "'real' nature" of something, become abstracted too quickly, losing connection with people's real life experiences and hence with their values and commitments. This leads to "unproductive impasses" in the argumentation, another form of stalemate (Schiappa, cited in Zarefsky, 1997, p. 4).

The third form of definitional argument developed by Zarefsky is *argument by definition*, and this is the form upon which we will elaborate. In argument by definition, "The key definitional move is simply stipulated, as if it were a natural step along the way of justifying some other claim." In this sense, the key argumentative step of defining one's terms

“is taken by making moves that are not themselves argumentative at all. They are not claims supported by reasons and intended to justify adherence by critical listeners. Instead they are simply proclaimed as if they were indisputable facts” (Zarefsky, 1997, p. 5).

Yet arguments *by definition* are critical moves that are often deployed in the construction of broader situational definitions. Zarefsky notes that in the examples of argument by definition that he discusses “what is really being defined is not a term but a situation or frame of reference” (1997, p. 5). He suggests four types of argumentative moves that can be employed in producing arguments by definition. These are associations, dissociations, ambiguities, and frame-shifting language (1997, pp. 7-9). Of these, we will focus on two techniques of association suggested by Zarefsky:

1. *“expanding the meaning of a ‘term of art,’” that is, of a “seemingly common and non-technical term that, when placed in a particular context, normally is given precise meaning,”* (e.g., rape of the environment).

2. *using persuasive definitions: “A persuasive definition is one in which favorable or unfavorable connotations of a given term remain constant but are applied to a different denotation. In this way, connotations surrounding the original term are transferred to a different referent”* (1997, p. 7), (e.g., the war on drugs).

In our analysis of argument by definition in the contemporary political discourse of Vladimir Putin, we rely heavily on such associative argumentative moves.

We also use the method of textual indexing advanced by Burke, who suggests a “Theory of Indexing” key terms in a text as a procedure by which a critic can discover and “prove” what may be non-obvious “motives” in a text (Burke, 1964, pp. 145-172). In a discussion of “our words for motive,” Burke maintains that these words (he gives an example of “duty”) are “in reality words for situations,” as we have construed or defined those situations (1935, pp. 29-31). We contend that the indexical structures also reveal evidence of redefinitions of terms. We see them as techniques by which to identify the interanimated meaning of terms when used in relation to each other in specific texts. The four indexical structures suggested by Burke are: Association, Dissociation, Progression, and Transformation (Burke 1964, pp. 145-172)

The use of words in ways that create transparent patterns of association is the

clearest illustration of argument by definition, and persuasive definitions could be an example of that. In contrast, dissociation is primarily concerned with the creation of oppositions. These may be polarities (e.g., freedom or death) or more subtle forms of dialectical play between terms.

3. *Putin's use of argument by definition*

Turning, then, to Vladimir Putin, one might argue that he has been moving toward the Russian version of a 'reset' in relations with the West almost since he became President in 2000. Still, for much of his first two terms, he argued that Russia was "a European nation." Recently, however, by turning the country's focus eastward, Putin has moved Russia into another period of transition, what he terms the "Third Revolution," reanimating the historical and traditional separation of Russia from the West. In doing this, Putin has recontextualized and redefined many of the terms associated with Western ideologies: *rule of law*, *freedom*, even *democracy* itself.

Putin began this reorientation by reclaiming Russian history, including the Soviet period, reviving a sense of nationalism, and identifying both with a renewed relationship between the citizen and the state. The interanimations of these elements with the reconstituted ideographs of Western democracy produces the "New Russia," oriented eastward rather than toward the West, proud of its 1000 year history, glorifying the defeat of Germany in the Great Patriotic War, with its own interpretations of freedom and democracy.

To explicate the definitional moves that result in this reanimated Russia, we focus primarily on 4 speeches given in Putin's current term as President: a speech on Russia Day (June 12) 2013; a pair of remarks celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Russian Constitution (December 12 and 13, 2013); and the address on the annexation of Crimea (March 18, 2014). These speeches illustrate Putin's use of definitional argument to reconstitute *freedom* as prosperity and well-being; *democracy* as an instrumental value rather than a terminal one; and the *rule of law* as law-and-order. In addition, we examine Putin's letter to the American people, published in *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013.

Russia Day is a relatively new holiday, established to celebrate Russian history and to encourage greater national pride at a time when the Russian people were looking outward for moral leadership and validation. There is an instrumental overlay to most of Putin's speeches, and this one is no exception, as Putin

collapses all 3 terms that are of interest here into a process-oriented marker melded with a history lesson. After a sentence that encapsulates a decade of economic change and hardship following the fall of the Soviet Union (ironically, probably the period of greatest personal freedom and freedom of speech in post-Soviet Russia), Putin declares that the character of the Russian people brought the country through the transition and “set our country firmly on a development track that is inseparable from the ideas of democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law.” (June 12, 2013).

Putin’s public approach to governance describes Russia as something of a work in progress, constantly in transition, moving along an arc of progress demarcated by ticks on a yardstick visible primarily to Putin. The goal is a “better quality of life” for all Russians, and “democratic procedures, the federal system, the market economy and guarantees for human rights” all “must work” toward this goal. By assuming that the purpose of democratic process, rule of law, and human rights is to progress along this continuum toward a better life, he reduces them to an instrumentality of economic prosperity. Their value lies not in their intrinsic worth as values of a free people, but, rather, in their ability to move the country along the continuum. As instrumentalities, then, if progress is deemed insufficient, they can be modified, truncated, or even eliminated in the interest of progress toward the goals.

By referendum on December 12, 1993, the Russian people approved the Constitution that is in force today. It was one of the earliest acts of the new Russian Federation and represented a major move toward democratization. Last year—2013—marked the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Russian Constitution; the country celebrated that anniversary with a concert and, the next day, a meeting between the Constitutional Court Judges and the President. Presented with a perfect opportunity to discuss the rule of law in Russia, Putin did not disappoint. Again, however, his instrumentalist approach to democratic values prevailed.

As Putin notes, “The Constitution validated the unwavering priority of our people’s rights and freedoms and raised the status of the state itself ... to a new, democratic foundation.” Certainly, the Constitution instantiated the democratic process that followed the years of Soviet rule. Yet Putin sees the Constitution as the initiator of the path to the country’s goals, not as the guarantor of rights and democratic process:

“The Constitution opened a new, constructive path to development on the basis of clear goals, intentions and values. ...It represents a long-term strategy for Russia’s development, a foundation for strengthening public stability...”
(December 12, 2013)

The Constitution, then, functions much as ordinary laws do – providing stability, order, continuous development.

Two events in the past year have grabbed the world’s consciousness and focused attention on Russia: Syria and Crimea. In Syria, as the U.S. pondered its response, Putin published an open letter to the American people in *The New York Times* (September 11, 2013). The date was not lost on many. We believe such a move is unprecedented, and even today it is hard to imagine a similar letter from Obama – or any U.S. President – appearing in a Russian newspaper. Putin attributes his strategy to the diminished contact between the U.S. and Russia, and interestingly, ascribes this action to a desire to preserve world order and stability. In the letter, Putin uses a slippery slope argument to set up the definitional move that underlies his message. A strike by the U.S., should it occur, would escalate the conflict and enable it to spread beyond Syria. It would destabilize the Middle East and North Africa even further. And, it would “throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance” (Putin, 2013).

Setting aside the merits or lack thereof with regard to Syria, here we see Putin’s conflation of rule of law, international law, and order. In other words, the purpose of the rule of law is order; it is not a guarantor of citizen rights, but serves to strengthen the state. Surely, one purpose of laws is order; but the concept ‘rule of law’ is a philosophical approach designed to spare citizens the capriciousness of the rule of individuals. Thus its promise is consistency of treatment and a form of justice. In Putin’s construction, however, the purpose of law melds into the state’s desire to suppress chaos.

Putin posits the conflict in Syria not as a struggle for democracy, but as a conflict between “government and opposition in a multireligious country.” [NYT September 11, 2013] In Putin’s view, to attempt to restore order from the outside would not only violate international law, it would undermine international law in the world community. After scolding the U.S. about its tendency toward interventionism and belief in its own exceptionalism, Putin urges America to join non-interventionist efforts to resolve the issue. A grateful Obama put any plans he

had for a military strike against Syria on hold.

About 6 months later, following the successful completion of the Sochi Olympics, Russia stunned the world by annexing Crimea; on March 18, Putin spoke to the Duma and other Federal officials, as well as the people of Russia, Crimea and the world.

We noted at the beginning of this paper that the legitimacy of a particular ideological construction at any given point in time is bolstered through selective appropriation of historical instances in which the ideographs employed by a rhetor align with the descriptive meaning of the term as it is used in the synchronic construction. It follows, therefore, that if the denotation of a term is materially different in one society – as compared to another society – that single term can be deployed to achieve differing effects in international discourse. Similarly, if a term has one set of associations in one societal milieu, but conjures up a different set of associations in a different milieu, its use (or the choice of a different term instead) can serve varying rhetorical purposes depending on the audience.

A specific instance of speaking to different audiences can be seen on the official website of the Russian presidency – <http://www.kremlin.ru/> . This Russian language site provides the text of all official statements, pronouncements, and speeches by Vladimir Putin. But there also exists an English language web page – <http://eng.kremlin.ru/> – that mirrors the Russian language site; it provides official government translations of the materials presented originally in Russian.

We studied fourteen public statements by Vladimir Putin that touch upon the themes *democracy*, *freedom*, and *rule of law*. (Four of these speeches are analyzed here in some detail.) We compared the Russian and English versions of all fourteen statements – primarily to ensure that our English language analysis was based on a correct understanding of the actual Russian statements, but also to determine if there were any substantive differences between the versions heard and read by Russians and the translated versions accessible to English speakers. On the whole there is a high level of conformance between the Russian and English texts: the translations correspond very closely to the source files in content and tone. That is, an English reader can gain from the translations both a reliable understanding of Putin’s meaning and a good “feel” for his rhetorical posture. This makes it possible for us to analyze his speeches with a great degree

of confidence in our conclusions.

An important exception is the critical speech given by Putin on the annexation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. This was a major political appearance, and here one can discern substantive differences between word choices and phrasing uttered by Putin in comparison to the “equivalent” passages quoted in English below.

We are not concerned with instances where Western readers would simply disagree with the Russian President. Rather, there are a number of instances in which the Russian and English versions of Putin’s speech create – and, we contend, purposely so – completely different impressions on his domestic and foreign audiences. We discuss these by type.

3.1 *Great and small*

We have great respect for people of all the ethnic groups living in Crimea. This is their common home, their motherland, and it would be right – I know the local population supports this – for Crimea to have three equal national languages: Russian, Ukrainian and Tatar.

This is pretty innocuous in English, but there are two subtle differences from the Russian – one insignificant, but the other crucial to an understanding of Putin’s ultimate geopolitical strategy in the region. Putin actually says, “We respect // have respect for” the various nationalities that make up the local population: nothing in the Russian equates to great respect. More importantly, he uses a common term – *malaya rodina* ‘home region’ – for “motherland” that presages his later use of the 19th century term *Malorossiya* in reference to all of eastern and southern Ukraine – that portion of the country he needs to control in order to have a land route to Crimea and the Transdnestria region of Moldova, two areas he claims want reunification with the Russian Federation. This is, we believe, the first verbal hint of his ultimate goal.

3.2 *Now and then*

Putin claims that the 1954 decision of Nikita Khrushchev to declare Crimea a portion of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic – a decision that makes geographical sense, but was of no political consequence within the structure of the USSR – was illegal. “What matters now is that this decision was made in clear violation of the constitutional norms that were in place even then.” One can agree

or disagree with Putin's judgment. However, in the Russian, the text more properly reads: "What is important to us is (something quite) different - this decision was made...." This is important to me; this is important to Russia.

Putin readily admits that the 1954 decision was a mere formality, since it never occurred to Khrushchev or anyone else that the Soviet Union would ever fall apart. "It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it was not simply robbed, it was plundered." So, all Russia has done in reclaiming Crimea is take back what had been stolen from it, stolen, presumably, by the Ukrainians.

3.3 Riots in the streets

Putin claims that he understands and even supports the protesters

"who came out on Maidan with peaceful slogans against corruption, inefficient state management and poverty. The right to peaceful protest, democratic procedures and elections exist for the sole purpose of replacing the authorities that do not satisfy the people."

But, he says, those who stood behind the events in Ukraine leading to the overthrow of President Yanukovich had a different agenda: *"They resorted to terror, murder and riots. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites executed this coup."*

Anyone who followed reports of the Maidan uprising knows how violent the protests became. A peaceful demonstration against the government decision not to engage with the European Union for economic and political reasons soon turned nasty. Protesters and the troops deployed to control them battled continuously. Extreme right-wing (nationalist) groups and neo-Nazi skinheads provided muscle in support of the protest. Both pro- and anti-government forces were accused of murdering supporters in the other camp. And many citizens of Ukraine who are of Ukrainian descent (a large segment of population is Russian) do indeed hate the Russian Federation as the successor to a Soviet Union that treated them brutally before, during, and after World War II.

What is wrong with the statement quoted above - beyond the obvious hyperbole and over-simplification - is that in Russian the text actually reads, "... *terror, murders, and pogroms.*" In pre-Soviet Russia Ukrainian Cossacks were used by the czar's representatives to carry out pogroms against Jews in their midst. The

word itself is guaranteed to inflame passions against all Ukrainians. But neither the Maidan uprising nor any of the events that followed had anything to do with anti-Semitic impulses among the Ukrainian population. We would contend that the use of *riots* in the English text is a deliberate attempt to mask from Western readers the inflammatory, anti-Ukrainian subtext of this speech. Had the government translators written what Putin actually said, the single word *pogrom* could have undermined any sympathetic reading Westerners might have attributed to this speech.

3.4 *Imposters and executioners*

The word pogroms, which appears about one-third of the way into this speech, introduces a particularly inflammatory segment of Putin's rhetoric - a segment that is masked in the English version. We will highlight two other choices that clearly show the intent behind this speech, which was to make a direct appeal to Russian sensibilities, while hiding that appeal from outside observers by carefully redacting the official translation.

Putin states, "*It is also obvious that there is no legitimate executive authority in Ukraine now.*" To the extent that the elected President has fled the country and most of his inner circle has been replaced in the government without general elections, this claim has credibility. A certain level of interregnum certainly obtained. What is most interesting at this juncture is the manner in which Putin describes that situation: "*Many government agencies have been taken over by the imposters....*"

'*Imposter*' is a fascinating choice made by the government translators: while not incorrect, it clearly lacks the connotative power of the source word - "*samozvanets*" - it represents in the original Russian. Literally that word means '*the self-proclaimed.*' But psychologically it refers unambiguously to the interregnum that occurred at the beginning of the 17th century when Ivan the Terrible died without an heir to the throne (having killed his own son in a fit of insane rage) and to the ascendance of the so-called 'False Dmitry' - a peasant, supported by certain noblemen, who claimed he was that son, still alive and come to claim his rightful place on the throne. This period in Russian history, called the Time of Troubles, led to the installation of the Romanov dynasty that ruled until the 1917 socialist revolution. Upon hearing this word most Russians will immediately think of the chaos and political instability that characterized the period. It is obvious that Putin has chosen his words carefully, playing on their

desire for stability, harkening back to the chaos and strife that characterized the Yeltsin years, and striking fear in the minds of the citizenry. *'Imposter'* can never evoke to a Westerner the visceral impact generated by *"samozvanets"* in the hearts and minds of Russians.

Putin goes on to say, "This is not a joke - this is reality....Those who opposed the coup were immediately threatened with repression. Naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, the Russian-speaking Crimea." One could quarrel with Putin regarding his characterization of the protesters in Ukraine and the manner in which they treated those who supported Yanukovich. But the translation is accurate, insofar as it goes. Unfortunately, the English rendition leaves out one small element: *"Those who opposed the coup were immediately threatened with repression and execution."*

All of the differences in content, tone, and psychological appeal described above make it clear that the Russian government sees its English language website as a rhetorical vehicle to influence Western opinion in ways that differ from its attempts to influence the opinions of the Russian speaking electorate at home. Putin carefully chooses the ideographs he deploys in his public pronouncements. Obviously, his official translators are equally careful in making their rhetorical choices.

The English version of this speech represents the culmination of the definitional moves made by Putin following his inauguration. He constructs the situational definition through a series of carefully selected analogies, thereby illustrating the themes running through the other speeches we have examined: *rule of law* (and *order*), instrumental values, *democracy*, and *freedom* not as intertwined reflexive concepts but as separate concepts that must work to strengthen the state. Thus Putin defines the situation relative not only to Crimea, but also to the West. In so doing he emphasizes themes related to national identity:

"Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea.

... we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our

common source and we cannot live without each other."

Each of these points is an ideograph that carries historical weight and reveals personal and public motives for action. Thus, Putin revealed his synchronic definition of the situation: Russia restored, protecting its people from the depredations of the West. This line of argument also foreshadows the anti-Western [especially anti-American] propaganda that has become commonplace in Russian media.

4. *Conclusion*

Hill and Gaddy interpret Vladimir Putin as a statist, appointed to serve the Russian state and restore its greatness. He is, from this perspective, an executor of the state's interests: The demise of the USSR meant a weakening of the Russian state, its institutions, its reach and influence. Thus, restoring Russia's power has been a clearly stated goal of Putin's tenure from the beginning.

To achieve this goal, Putin must first redefine the situation of the post-Soviet world and Russia's place in it. In doing so, he can change the underlying premises of future action....

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