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Life in the Shadows of Geopolitics

Everyday Practices at and Public Discourse

On the Slovenian-Croatian Border

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ABSTRACT

The article shows how images of as well as identity-formation at the newly erected Slovenian-Croatian border are informed by geopolitical decision making, at a more general discursive level as well as in its interference with the everyday life practices of people living in the border region of Istria. However, images of borders and identities are not simply determined by geopolitical changes. Rather, geopolitics disseminate into a complex set of narratives and practices, where articulations depend on different forms of interactions with the border. There are for instance great differences between the narratives of those for whom the borders are abstract constructions articulating differences between state populations, and those who live their everyday life at and with the border. At the level of narratives, often geopolitical decisions therefore translate into conflicting images and, as is the case with the narratives illuminated in the article, into various political sentiments. Rather than simply focusing on public policy in border regions, it is important that border studies shed light on these sentiments and conflicts and how people, especially those living at and with borders deal with the conflicts in their everyday lives because this is the most important field of practice in which borders are made visible and become politically contested.

Keywords: Border practices, everyday life, discourse, conflict, resistance

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1. Introduction

“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”

- Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*

When Yugoslavia started to fall apart for the second time in its history, the geographical area became subject to a tremendous amount of changes, including the drawing of new and more borders between independent states (Lampe 2000). The first to be recognized by the international community, today separates the republic of Slovenia from that of Croatia. Due to the fairly quiet Slovene secession from Yugoslavia and the early international recognition of Slovenia and Croatia’s right to declare the states independent, people rarely regard the existence of the Slovenian-Croatian border as geopolitically arbitrary. The institution of this border, which is today also an external EU- and Schengen border, nevertheless changed life for people living at and across the border. Hence, even when the physical existence of the border is not questioned, it is and will remain a geopolitical construct intruding in and disturbing everyday life and interaction in the regions at the newly erected borderline (cf. Barbic 2004; Pavlakovich-Kochi and Stiperski 2004).

In this article, I shed light on a set of border practices and identity-discourses located in intersections and tensions between geopolitical decisions and the everyday life of people living at the Italian, Slovenian and Croatian peninsula Istria. Due to the history of this peninsula, much of the reasoning guiding life here reach deeper than the geopolitical decisions dividing the peninsula into different states. Still – and perhaps therefore - geopolitics has an impact on life in the region. Moreover, the article describes how Croatian and Slovenian national identities are constructed in public and political discourse, a construction of national identity feeding into so called “realpolitik”. Whereas everyday life on Istria to a large extent is lived without confrontations between these national identities, the public and political discourse is acted out in a different space, which has a
stronghold in stabilizing the image of Slovenia and Croatia as two separate and different nations consisting of different people with different outlooks on life.

As of yet, my reflections are only fragments of a story about border practices and identity-formation at this border, a story lacking clear connections and just like others, I am not able to give a full account of the conflicts and tensions experienced because of the existence of the border. Taken together, however, the stories illustrate how everyday life in and at borders is far removed from both identity-discourses and geopolitics, at the same time as they illustrate conflicts generated by as well as what is at stake for people when discourses construct and geopolitical decisions are made. Since the 1990s, public policy approaches in border studies have, in line with EU visions, concentrated their investigations of border regions on those networks of agents, which are deliberately engaged in dismantling border, that is, different kinds of cross-border partnerships and cooperation (Scott 2006; Boedeltje et al. 2006). These networks might consist of what we usually term political agents, such as local politicians and professional consultants, those individuals who supposedly move the developments of public policies in border regions. However, if public sentiment affects policy-making, we cannot simply focus on the righteous few. We must add to these considerations by investigating politics as ways in which borders are lived, crossed and narrated in everyday life practices. We need a way of studying policy making, which takes into consideration that politics is not just conducted in accordance with EU-policies and governmental institutions and implemented by bureaucrats and other professionals. As Garfinkel reminds us: “Predictability arises not from ‘big’ causal factors that precede (and might predict) situations of work but from everyday, mundane (and yet remarkable) accomplishment of those people and things involved.” (Garfinkel 1967)

Great decisions might in other words not be taken in Café Europa but rest assured that everybody here has an opinion and over time such opinions might come to count more than the actions of the above mentioned political agents. Hence, the article’s stories are told from the ground, so to speak. The attempt is to emphasize the ability people have to participate in the making of borders as well as the regulations and empowerment that can result from such border activities (cf. Rumford 2006, 2008). Focus hereby extend from border practices of the EU, the state and those of professional cross-border cooperation, to the practices of ordinary people and the way in which they construct, shift, and dismantle borders (Galasinski and Meinhof 2002; Meinhof and Galasinski 2002; Meinhof 2002; Schultz et al. 2002; Sandberg 2009). Borders are thus also conceptualized as practices that situate and constitute in the everyday performance of them (Paasi 2005). Using an
ethnographic approach, we inevitably find things that public policy approaches do not discover because the normative framework of these approaches does not allow them to. By illuminating the particular but also very different meanings people ascribe to borders dependent on their interactions with them, it is possible to show how culture and politics interlink in the concepts we live by and not just in the political act itself.

The stories told in the article were gathered and narrated by me during and due to fieldwork in Northern Croatia in periods from October 2009 to August 2011 where I lived in Zagreb and went to Istria on regular basis. They should be considered snapshots of everyday life, of public discourses as well as on state policies that currently inform images of borders in the two countries. Some stories are known to the public - one is for instance an official dispute - whereas some of the stories are narrated by individuals who have to relate to the existence of borders because of their occupation, the location of their home or simply just their name. None of the stories are given precedence over others, even when some stories might be more known, popular or disputed than others.

Over time, the attempt is to develop a method to study borders emphasizing “ethnography on the move”. The ethnography is moving in a physical sense in that it moves along with the object-subject of research whatever its status might be and wherever it might go. We can encounter our border by the physically existing Slovenian-Croatian border but if this border moves to Stockholm, Brussels or to the internet, then we must follow it to understand the practices and narratives constituting it. Consequently, the movement also has to take place between structural and institutional levels – between the EU, the state, the nation, the region, the locality, civil society and the family. All levels inform border practices (Donnan and Wilson 1999; Wilson 2012, Andersen et al. 2012). The movement is therefore also one between academic disciplines. Anthropology, history, sociology and politics are all part of the same story and rather than analytically separating these in order to grasp more and more detail, it is necessary to approach lived life as webs of relations in which we, as researchers, must situate ourselves and navigate.

1 The ethnography is inspired by Actor Network Theory’s attempts to follow the actor rather than normatively constructing our objects of investigation before we engage with them (cf. Latour 1993). However, in comparison to ANT’s emphasis on networks, ethnography on the move recognises the importance of institutions, as in traditions, habits, social patterns and social structures, which guides our practices. Moreover, in contrast to ANT, ethnography on the move takes seriously the hermeneutic tradition within which ethnographic studies locate and recognises that we, as researchers construct the narratives we tell, thus positioning ourselves as spectators and participants at once (Clifford and Marcus 1986). However, unlike how the representational debate dealt with the issue this is not understood as an invitation to do fiction but rather as a realisation that we, as researchers, always speak on behalf of those we understand to be important to speak on behalf of.

2 For a fuller account of ethnography on the move, see Andersen 2012.
2. Trouble at the border

Despite the history of the Slovenian-Croatian border, political and public discourse in the two countries do not really question that we confront a border, which has mentally been there much longer than its actual existence. The discourse on national differences between Slovenians and Croats is extremely vital, not just among the older generations but also the younger. In recent years, the discourse gained substance due to conflicts between the two countries over accession to land in the Piran bay as well as ownership of the Krsko Nuclear Power Plant and the Ljubjanska Banka. It seems natural today, independent on whether or not one felt part of a larger Yugoslav union, to talk of the two populations as fundamentally different, both in future aspirations and because of their geopolitical situation in the past.

A story that caught my attention while living in Croatia reflects these nation building tendencies, which symbolically consolidate the Croatian-Slovenian border. It is a story about a middle-aged man, Joska Joras and his house, captured in a dispute with the Croatian and the Slovenian state. Joska Joras is a Slovene, who lives in Croatia. However, Joras is famous in both Croatia and Slovenia today because of how he has raised the question of whether he does actually live in Croatia and not in Slovenia. He provides maps, local population registers and his version of local history to back up his claim that his house is in Slovenian territory (Ljubljana Life.com 2008). He also refuses to follow Croatian jurisdiction such as for instance when he has to pay customs to Croatia on a washing machine he bought in Slovenia (Ibid.).

Joras’ house is located on the south side of the river Dragonja and the stretch of land is considered Croatian territory. Ownership of the strip of land is officially unresolved, however, even when Slovenia conceded the house to Croatia because of the dispute with Joras.
Joras’ reason for wanting to live in Slovenia is personal:

“I feel a duty to respect the heritage of my family,” he says, revealing that the house where he has lived for 40 years belonged to his mother who was kept in a concentration camp for three years during Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia. “I feel a duty to maintain the integrity of the country for which she was sacrificed.”” (Ljubljana Life.com 2008)

Hence, Joras flies a big Slovenian flag on the side of his house, which the Croatians say is done as a provocation and he has a big sign facing the Croatian border (which is just a few meters away) that reads in large black letters: “This is Slovenia.” Joras also refuses to pass through the Croatian border post - despite of the fact that he does pass through the Slovenian post just north of the river. Instead he uses a grave track between the two border posts to get to his house. He used to drive along this track but is unable to do so now as the Croatian authorities have erected four large, yellow planters that block his driveway. Joras is determined that one of these days he will remove them.  

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3. In-determined borders

Generally speaking, Croats and Slovenians do not think of Joras as anything more than a mad old man with nationalist aspirations but even when this is the case, it is not the existence of the Slovenian-Croatian border, which is questioned by the public, rather, the critique concerns Joras’ determinacy to prove that his particular border is misplaced. Exactly therefore, Joras’ story provides an entrance to understand the current status of the border between the two countries and thereby to understand how complicated life may be at this border as well as how these complications influence articulations of identity in the two countries.

The physical existence of this particular border is not as natural as many Croats and Slovenians believe. Foremost, the entire border was never formally drawn, neither in the context of Yugoslavia nor in negotiations between the two states. This counts for the important sea territory of the republics:

“In the second Yugoslavia, there was no delimitation on the sea between the republics, which is why also the sea border in Istria between the former Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Croatia was not determined.” (Krnel-Umek 2005: 34)

However, as the Slovenian-Croatian border area did not cause major problems when it was still part of Yugoslavia, at least not in comparison with much more urgent border problems in the areas
dividing Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia (Lampe 2000), it is, as indicated, only parts of the border that have been renegotiated after 1991, something, which was the result of political disputes occurring during the 1990s and 2000s. In one of these disputes, Slovenia demanded of Croatia to give up parts of its sea and coastal territory if the country was to be accepted into the European Union. Slovenia forced Croatian politicians to enter renegotiation of the border along the coast-line because Slovenia did not have direct access to international waters and has to pass through either Italian or Croatian sea if they want access. Slovenia, with its very limited coast line, first claimed its right to more sea territory and parts of the coastal line in Istria. Later the claims were moderated to only concern sea territory. The claims were partly based on Slovenia not playing a role in the negotiations after the Second World War between Yugoslavia and the allies deciding which areas of Istria should belong to Italy and which to Yugoslavia (BBC News 2009). Today, however, this border dispute has been settled by an independent commission joined by the European Union proposing to include parts of Croatian sea territory into Slovenia in order for Slovenia to gain direct access to international waters and without taking over any of the Croatian coastal territory.

Nevertheless, the questions remain: Is it the Mirna that divides Croatia and Slovenia? Is it the Dragonja and where exactly by the Dragonja? Or it is in the middle of the Piran bay that the line ought to be drawn, as it is at the moment? A range of historians provide documentation and argue
for where and why the border should be drawn. The histories are based on different kinds of historical evidence, mainly focusing on ethnic divides in Istria or, from the Slovenian side, the fact that a new negotiation of the border is needed because of new state divisions in the area. The stories also differ tremendously, as one might anticipate, depending on whether they are written by Slovenian or Croatian historians (Krnel-Umek 2005). Such histories not only illustrate how valid historical sources can be used in different ways considering the interests involved but they are also examples of how state borders are not easily constructed and consolidated.

4. It’s all Ideology

Despite of the above mentioned political conflicts played out between the Slovenian and Croatian state, the populations at the border live fairly peacefully with each other (cf. also Barbic 2004, Pavlakovich-Kochi and Stiperski 2004). When visiting Istria and talking to the local populations, you will in other words confront many people like Joska Joras but images of the border influenced strongly by the sense of familiarity. The populations living on both sides of the border have had a peaceful relation for years and the other is therefore not very often articulated as “the Slovenian other” or “the Croatian other”. In an attempt to get Croats to articulate some form of unfamiliarity with Slovenes in the context of my fieldwork and this in order for the border to appear in the narratives, I felt forced to refer to the recent conflict between the Croatian and Slovenian states over sea access and the way in which the existence of different nationalities at the peninsula are made visible because of these political circumstances. However, despite all my efforts it was obvious that even here the ‘ordinary’ Slovene stayed familiar to the Croats I spoke with. Rather than distinguishing between themselves and the Slovene population it was politicians and a few more eccentric Slovenes who stuck out as being different. This was apparent in the fragments below referred from my conversations with locals on the Croatian side of the Piran Bay area.

A restaurant owner in Umag located in Croatia approximately three kilometers from the Piran Bay and fifteen kilometers from the border, complained to me about a residential area set up on the Croatian side of the Piran Bay by Slovenians and surrounded by fence in order to keep people out so that they cannot access the sea (Conversation 1). The problem is not only that Slovenians occupy Croatian land and exclude local residents from access to the beach, which is public area in Croatia unless you pay a leasing fee to the local municipality. It is also that none of the two governments interferes with the Slovenes doing this. People living on Istria do not feel they
have any support from either of the two governments, nor from the EU. In general, however, there are no problems between the Slovenians and the Croatians in the area: “I do not know what they say on television but we have no problems with the Slovenians. Most Slovenians just come here to get drunk because it is cheaper than in Slovenia.” (Ibid.) The restaurant owner continues to recommend that Croatia joins the EU, as he says: “They cannot take the land if both Italy and Croatia are part of the EU.” (Ibid.) However, there is no doubt in his voice when he says that if parts of the Croatian coastal line in the Piran Bay is given over to Slovenia then he will go to war with Slovenia - and the statement is certainly not made as a joke.

A restaurant waiter in Umag said this about the border dispute

“But I do not know what they want. Croatia offered an official statement which said that no borderlines drawn in those documents should be seen as prejudging the border. This was mediated by France, but Slovenia still refuses to accept that statement. Should Croatia send documents with no Croatian-Slovenian borders drawn at all? Or do they want us to put the borderlines as they want it? If latter is the case, that’s clear blackmail. The problem is also that I can’t see those documents anywhere on the internet. I tried to look for it - no trace of them - neither at the Croatian government site about negotiating process, nor at the EU site.” (Conversation 2)

Of course people living on Istria were afraid of loss of land while the border dispute was on but what they consider most problematic is how political negotiations take place far removed from their lives. The distance to political decisions is part of a historical memory in an area where ideology has prevailed and most often without relation to lived life. For many people living in Istria, it thus seems that issues of importance are always settled somewhere else and by someone else.

There might be an (more or less) official border dividing Slovenia and Croatia on Istria, but the other, as in the Slovenian other, is not really other here. Rather, they are part of us, maybe with a few differences but they basically act like us and we recognize ourselves in them. People understand each other on a deeper level. They do not make problems out of their differences; it is others who do that. And the other is ideology and the political elite, including those rich Slovenians taking advantage of the politicians and lawgivers who are incapable of carrying out their jobs. The fact that this border will probably change significantly in a few years when it is altered into an internal EU and Schengen-border simply proves the fact that people living at Istria are captured by political discourses in relation to which they have very little say.
5. My virtual (br)other

So, rather than being an integral part of lived life at the border, emphasizes on national differences appears in political and public discourses. Slovenians and Croats for instance have long debates with each other on the internet, inferring that virtual meeting places like Facebook and You-Tube are where you find an articulation of the other, something, which will help stabilize the national imagining for the time to come.

Here the context is mostly one where images of the other appear in a brotherly fashion. Slovenia is the little brother trying to free himself from the bigger brother(s) by entering a new community, the EU and thus pretending to be European and not from Balkan. Moreover, it is a familiar gesture that Croatians, that is, the big brother makes jokes about the little brother, especially in relation to the size of Slovenia. A popular joke in Croatia is that pilots avoid landing their plane in Slovenia because they risk ending up in a neighboring country when they want to turn around to go back. In the alternative guide to Slovenia (The Glory of Carniola 2005) it says:

According to new research, Slovenia has a seaside. Eyewitnesses claim to have seen it around Piran and Koper.

The climate is middle European, in the northwest it’s Alpine, and lately it’s anti-Croatian.

The war for Slovenian independence (1991-1991) was one of the bloodiest, longest, and most exhausting in the history of humanity.

Slovenia has about 1.5 million inhabitants. For comparison: this is how many people fit in Zagreb’s hippodrome. Of these: 16% are stingy and selfish; 14% are rude and arrogant; 13% are alternative; 6% are fat; 51% are women; 0.002% are innocent

The other is used to trace the ideals that construct an image of the Croat self, and this in the reverse. Slovenes are ridiculed and the country portrayed as tiny, inferring that we should respect Croats more than Slovenes and this also because Croatia is bigger – it is actually a proper country whereas Slovenia is an insignificant dot on the map. While living in Croatia I confronted many such

4 YouTube videos illustrate this image of Slovenia among Croats. See for instance: ‘Answer on “Slovenian answer to Croatian stupidity” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKC8TdLpFil&feature=related’ and ‘Why Croatia “sux” (Croatian answer)” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzEl8PaWBWU&feature=BF&playnext=1&list=QL&index=1

Slovenian responses to this view of the country most often refers to the violent histories of the neighboring countries, Italy, Serbia and Croatia, claiming that Croatia stole Istria from them. See ‘Istria peninsula is Slovenian land, stolen by Croatia’ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4M2i5D_FyIU&feature=related
comments about the Slovenes and Slovenia, emphasizing the insignificance of the neighbors in the North. When I told my Croat language teacher that I wanted to go to Slovenia, she said half jokingly: “Why do you want to go to Slovenia? There is nothing to come for” (Conversation 3) – implicitly saying that Croatia has it all. Or even stronger: “Why do you want to go to Slovenia, there are no nice people there, they are cold and I do not like their ways of behaving” – implicitly saying that Croats are nice, warm and friendly. Moreover, what I most often hear in the street is that: “The Slovenians are ugly” – implicitly saying that Croats are all good looking. And finally, an utterance by my research assistant when we visited Istria together: “They [the Slovenians] speak a child’s language” – implicitly saying that Slovenes do not know how to speak properly (that is, Croatian).

State-borders are in other words not simply natural dividing lines between distinct nations and populations who have an essential and stable national identity rooted in historical soil. Rather, borders are constructs of geopolitical decisions, and not the least, of public discourse (Eder 2006) and they thus un-fold and de-fold in images of identity that might not have much to do with the political negotiations of them but nevertheless secure their existence. In the Slovenian-Croatian case, the border is very visible today because new state-territories, including new divisions between political systems and locations of decision-making powers, have to sediment. The construction of this particular border is thus not very solid and the images attempting to solidify it develop almost on daily basis and in different and conflicting directions.

6. Return to the border

The borders at the Istrian peninsula are, in contrast to those constituted in stereotypical images of the other, by and large characterized by a specific regionalized identity where nationalities are intertwined with each other. In her book, Cafe Europa, Slavenka Dragelic describes an incident in 1994 where a Croat reporter interviewed inhabitants of three Croatian border villages, which had been annexed overnight by Slovenes: “[H]e was faced with a strange reaction. To the Croat reporter, these people said that they were Croats, to Italian reporters that they were of course Italians and the Slovene reporters were told they were Slovenes. To the reporters it was impossible for one person to be a Croat, an Italian and a Slovene all at the same time.” (Dragelic 1996: 163) For the villagers on the other hand, the reporters misunderstood things because they asked the question of national identity as an either-or question. To many Istrians identity is in other words
more than having one nationality and many of them are unable to choose one nationality as their identity. As Drage lic writes: “Living in the border region, they understand better than anyone else that we all have mixed blood to a greater or lesser extent. They have also suffered from nationalism, and in its worst form – ethnic cleansing – enough to have grown tired of it.” (Ibid: 164) The Istrians instead imagine their regional belonging as their identity because they want to avoid being defined as a national of this or that state: “When you descend from Crni Kal to Socerga, from the mountains to the valley, you will get a sense of what this identity is all about. Here the landscape does not change, people understand each other’s languages and eat the same food, and yet everything is overshadowed by this newly erected monster – the iron construction called the state border that divides people.” (Ibid: 161)

This border, which today separates Istria, making one part external to Europe proper and the other internal is without doubt a geopolitical construct intruding in and disturbing everyday life and interaction in the border region of Istria. European integration might of course provide a solution to some of the problems. Expressed with words from an Istrian inhabitant (quoted in Slavenka Dragelic’ Cafe Europa): “Imagine, he says to me, one day perhaps only a few years from now both Slovenia and Croatia will be members of the European Union. All these papers and tensions, all our fears and insecurity will suddenly be obsolete. And no one will force us to identify with just one part of what we experience as our identity. I dream about that day, when nobody will hate me because of the food I prefer, my memory, or the language I speak.” (Ibid: 169) The rationales guiding life at the Istrian borders reach far deeper than what we tend to refer to as European Integration and Europeanization, yet, at the same time, European integration have had and will have a tremendous impact on life on the peninsula. Slovenian politicians want to be part of a Europe without frontiers but still refuse to dissolve frontiers when their interests are at stake, leaving the Istrian populations in the middle of a border dispute, which is not theirs. Some Euroskeptics on the peninsula would even claim that Europe, in the name of European Integration, created most of the problems that it now presents itself as a solution to.

7. Perspectives for an ethnography on the move
For Joska Joras, who strongly believes he is Slovene and lives in Slovenia, and for Karlo-Carletto who is Croat in the morning and Italian at night, the border is an integral part of life and, especially, of their sense of identity. Moreover, what life at the Istrian border may illustrate better than in many other border regions, is how geopolitical decisions and major changes in them inevitably interferes with life lived in a border region. Joras’ identity as a Slovene national is threatened because of official politics and a reluctance at this level to confront the issue of finally determining where the border is to be drawn. The service workers, but also the fishermen in Umag feel that they are left out of the picture when the political system negotiates matters that concern their very existence. However, in general people on Istria just want to go on living a life where the border is not made into a hindrance of interaction but remains an asset to it – very unlike those for whom the border is an abstract construct articulating differences between stereotypical images of national identities.

Policy approaches focusing on cross-border partnerships and cooperation in Europe, tend to forget practices and interactions at an everyday level that are deeply dependent on the very existence as well as the non-existence of state borders and how such practices play a constitutive role in consolidating images of borders. At the same time as state borders act symbolically to constitute and divide national identities, local sentiments may be deeply interconnected with regional nationalisms, like the one on Istria, and inevitably used to further the interests of border regions. On the other hand, borders might be understood as irrelevant for ‘real life’, and thus as artificial constructs, which intrude with what we believe we really are. Hence, borders are being done at various levels, including geopolitics, public and political discourse, historical narrative and everyday life practices, and this interrelates with feelings of national identity. In regards of all these levels, public policy approaches only captures a fragment of what is at stake at and, not the least, with our borders.

Borders exclude and include, they are functional and symbolic at once, they help us to construct national, regional, local and European identities, they generate conflicts between people at various levels of interaction – and sometimes they even generate conflicts within people. Borders prove that culture and politics always connects in the concepts we use to articulate who we are, concepts we also act upon. From an ethnographic perspective we can ask, whether this is not what geopolitics is all about, the multiplicity of acts that continuously disseminate, dissolve, disperse and construct border between us. Only an ethnography on the move can take this multiplicity into account by illuminating how borders locate in the imaginings and practices of many different actors as well as in relations between structural levels.
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