



**UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD EXTREMIST ACTIVITY**

***ATITUDES DOS ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS EM RELAÇÃO À ATIVIDADE  
EXTREMISTA***

***ACTITUDES DE ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS HACIA LA ACTIVIDAD  
EXTREMISTA***

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**ABSTRACT:** Study goal: to explore university students' attitudes toward extremist activity. Methods: The study is conducted on the students of Balashovsky Institute (branch) of the Federal State Educational Institution of Higher Vocational Education "Saratov National Research State University named after N.G. Chernyshevsky" (BI SSU) studying in pedagogical areas of education. Results: The study reveals average and high levels of ethnic tolerance in the students; most respondents consider the reasons behind the adoption of extremist ideology to be social factors; every second student condemns the actions of extremist nature in any form; as measures to counter extremism, the respondents suggest educational, outreach, informational technologies. To reduce the risks of the involvement of youth in extremist communities in a multinational region, an additional education program "Prevention of intolerance and extremism among young people" is developed and implemented in the educational component of the university.

**KEYWORDS:** Youth. Intolerance. Extremism. Prevention. Interethnic relations.

**RESUMO:** *Objetivo do estudo: explorar as atitudes de estudantes universitários em relação à atividade extremista. O estudo é realizado com os alunos do Instituto Balashovsky (filial) da Instituição Educacional Estadual Federal de Educação Profissional Superior "Universidade Estadual de Pesquisa Nacional de Saratov em homenagem a N.G. Chernyshevsky" (BI SSU) estudando em áreas pedagógicas de formação. Resultados: O estudo revela níveis médios e altos de tolerância étnica nos alunos; a maioria dos*

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*entrevistados considera que as razões por trás da adoção da ideologia extremista são fatores sociais; cada segundo aluno condena as ações de natureza extremista de qualquer forma; como medidas para combater o extremismo, os entrevistados sugerem tecnologias educacionais, de divulgação e de informação. Para reduzir os riscos do envolvimento de jovens em comunidades extremistas em uma região multinacional, um programa educacional adicional "Prevenção da intolerância e do extremismo entre os jovens" é desenvolvido e implementado no componente educacional da universidade.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Juventude. Intolerância. Extremismo. Prevenção. Relações interétnicas.

**RESUMEN:** *Objetivo del estudio: explorar las actitudes de los estudiantes universitarios hacia la actividad extremista. Métodos: El estudio se realiza sobre los estudiantes de las áreas de formación pedagógica. Resultados: El estudio revela niveles medios y altos de tolerancia étnica en los estudiantes; la mayoría de los encuestados considera que las razones detrás de la adopción de la ideología extremista son factores sociales; cada segundo estudiante condena las acciones de naturaleza extremista en cualquier forma; como medidas para contrarrestar el extremismo, los encuestados sugieren tecnologías educativas, de divulgación y de la información. Para reducir los riesgos de la participación de jóvenes en comunidades extremistas en una región multinacional, se desarrolla e implementa un programa educativo adicional "Prevención de la intolerancia y el extremismo entre los jóvenes" en el componente educativo de la universidad.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Juventud. Intolerancia. Extremismo. Prevención. Relaciones interétnicas.

## Introduction

In the conditions of the economic and political instability of modern society, the risk of adolescents and young people getting involved in radical extremist communities increases, which dictates the need to develop and implement a program for the prevention of extremism among students.

Economic crises, political instability, and the pandemic and its consequences have increased social distance and tension between socio-demographic groups, thus creating conditions for increased intolerance and the emergence of social and ethnic conflicts, including extremism and terrorism.

According to statistics of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, in January-September 2020, 651 crimes of extremist nature were registered, which is 43.4% higher than in 2019; the number of public calls for extremist activity (Article 272 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) using information and telecommunication technologies rose by 28.6% (BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE STATE OF CRIME IN THE RUSSIAN



FEDERATION IN JANUARY - SEPTEMBER 2020, 2020; IN RUSSIA, THE NUMBER OF TERRORIST CRIMES INCREASED BY MORE THAN A THIRD IN 2020, 2020). In the same period of 2021, the number of crimes of extremist nature grew by one third (+29.2%), reaching 915, of which 419 were qualified under article 280 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation “Public calls to extremist activity”, which is a rate 43% higher than in the same period of the previous year. The prevalence of extremist organizations and the nature of their activities on the territory of the Russian Federation can be traced by court resolutions, most of which are issued by the courts of Moscow and Moscow Oblast, Omsk, Krasnodar, Astrakhan, and the Republic of Tatarstan.

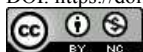
The concept of “extremism” is ambiguous and vague. On the one hand, it outlines a fairly wide range of problems, while on the other hand, it can be reduced to discrimination and violation of individual rights.

First, the perception and interpretation of any political phenomenon is always heterogeneous, so in addition to the moderate ones, there is always a certain number of political actors (individuals, movements, and parties) that express extreme or radical views that differ from the generally accepted ones. Virtually all European countries have had political movements whose program documents in one way or another contradicted the constitutions. Examples include the parties of J. M. Le Pen in France, J. Haider in Austria, and G. F. Finney in Italy.

Second, a challenge lies in the difficulty of classifying an action as extremist, because for some people, it may appear as a crime subject to public condemnation and criminal punishment, while others may view it as the assertion of their own interests, the struggle for equal rights, freedoms, and democratic values, which can become the subject of conflict and the disunity of social groups, a threat to national security.

Third, there is the problem of the ambivalence, inconstancy, and situationality in the expression or justification of extremist statements depending on the type of issue: international or internal migration, racism, religion, gender equality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc., which leads to the incitement of all types of extremism.

Despite the lack of a clear definition of extremism in the normative documents of the United Nations, in the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, the UN Secretary-General notes that it is a diverse phenomenon without a clear definition that is not a modern phenomenon and can be characteristic of any region, nationality, or belief system (PLAN OF ACTION TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM, 2015); the use of real or symbolic



violence against civilians for political purposes to instill fear, destabilize and then destroy the existing order (DOUZET, 2016).

In the Russian Federation, extremism is understood as a range of offenses, including violent alteration of the foundations of the constitutional system, violation of the integrity of the country; public justification of terrorism and other similar activities; inciting social, racial, national, or religious discord; propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority on various grounds; violation of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of individuals and citizens on the basis of their membership in a particular group, obstruction of the exercise of voting rights by citizens, obstruction of the lawful activities of government agencies, propaganda and public display of Nazi attributes, public calls for the commission of the aforementioned acts or the mass distribution of knowingly extremist materials, financing of such acts, or other assistance (RUSSIA, 2002).

The main reasons for the emergence of extremism are: first, the aggravation of existing contradictions in the economic, political, social, ethnonational, ideological, and legal spheres; second, the unwillingness of individuals and groups to adopt the way of life accepted by most members of society, their desire to gain advantages through violence; the intensification of migration processes; third, the use of extremist methods by individuals, organizations, and states to achieve political, economic and social goals; fourth, poverty, unemployment, lack of affordable housing; inadequate education and training; lack of life prospects; alienation and marginalization; increasing social inequality; weakening of family and social ties; the dissemination of views and ideas leading to increasing inequality, violence, and intolerance by the media (BESSCHETNOVA, 2014).

Extremism has various ideological orientations and targets. It can invade any sphere of social relations, including religious, national, inter-party, political, and environmental.

A peculiarity of modern extremism in Russia is also a significant decrease in the age of citizens involved in illegal activities. Today, the majority of extremist crimes are associated to a greater or lesser extent with young people of student and older adolescent age.

In contrast to other types, youth extremism has its own specific characteristics:

1. Often derived from adult extremism, but is less organized, spontaneous, ideologically shallow.
2. The most widespread is national (ethnic) extremism expressed in the form of extremely intolerant attitudes toward representatives of other races, nationalities, religions — from protests to vandalism and criminal offenses.

3. Young extremists are rarely likely to compromise and change their political stance in response to changing circumstances.

4. Lack of personal and social experience has a negative impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of extremist actions, which tend to be more aggressive and violent because young people are less likely to fear prison, death, and physical injury.

5. Some acts of an extremist nature committed by minors do not fall under the articles of the current legislation of the Russian Federation due to the fact that they are under the age of criminal responsibility.

6. The transformation of youth subcultures under the influence of changing political systems and socio-economic market conditions (e.g., “skinheads”).

Increasing social inequality, disunity of social groups, lack of a common national idea and unity of values and goals, high unemployment, and lack of access to quality vocational education give rise to mass internal migration, “brain drain” abroad, lack of prospects for human development, which forces young people to resort to extreme judgments and views.

According to the VTsIOM national poll conducted on June 25, 2020, Russians believe that the greatest chances for self-realization with self-reliance exist in the following areas: sports – 86% (97% of young people); military service – 84% (96% of young people); science and education – 82%; public organizations – 77%, entrepreneurship – 71%. At the same time, the reasons preventing Russians from achieving success and high social status include: low income – 36%; lack of social connections – 16%; lack of determination and diligence – 14% (SOCIAL ELEVATORS: DRIVING OR STANDING, 2020).

In such a situation, young people, especially those from low-resource categories of the population, on the one hand, have an a priori low social starting point and, on the other, are unable to find the reasons for their low social and financial status in their own behavior, persistence, social activity, and low levels of education and professional qualifications since it is easier for them to see the causes of their failure in the presence of numerous diasporas from CIS countries, which they believe to be factors of unemployment, the criminogenic conditions, and rising tax burden.

At the same time, it needs to be noted that virtually none of the known cases of “youth extremism” aim to call for the disintegration of the country, the introduction of external administration, and depopulation, i.e., the things directly associated with threats to the country’s national security. Unfortunately, the extremes have turned in the other direction: almost all forms of visible protest, especially against the existing political system, including

the active use of the Internet, are being labeled as extremist (KUDRINA; KUDRIN, 2015; RUSSIA, 2002; RASTORGUEV, 2018; RUBAN, 2019; SAVCHENKO, 2018).

### **Literature review**

An analysis of the literature on youth extremism shows that most of the research done in previous years lies within the legal sciences, while at present, the range of factors involved in national socialist trends, subcultures, and protest movements is expanding and is being studied from the perspective of pedagogy, psychology, sociology, political science, and other branches of science.

Various aspects of extremism are reflected in the works of Russian researchers, in particular Grachev, Nikishkin, and Vetrova (2019), Gorodentsev and Sheudzhen (2014) (extremism as a threat to national security); Besschetnova (2014), Kudrina and Kudrin (2015), Savchenko (2018), Rastorguev (2018) (youth extremism); Zubok and Chuprov (2009) (extremism, transgressiveness, and lability as factors of the group consciousness of young people leading to extremist actions); Kubyakin (2015), Ruban (2019) (countering youth extremism); Kozyrkov and Fomchenkova (2018) (association between intergenerational discrimination and antisocial behavior of young people and the splits in the cultural and social space of modern Russia); Demidova-Petrova (2018), Korneeva, Samygin, and Krotov (2016) (extremism as a form of deviant behavior), and other authors.

Among foreign scholars, a major contribution to the study of youth extremism has been made by Der Derian (2005); Douzet (2016); Gelfand *et al.* (2013) (the sociocultural component and extremism); Knight, Woodward and Lancaster (2017); Sotlar (2002) (extremism prevention technologies); Grossman *et al.*, (2020) (youth attitudes toward extremist activities); Aly, Taylor and Karnovsky (2014); Lösel *et al.*, (2018) (prevention of extremism through the education system); Oruc and Obradovic (2020) (reasons why young people join extremist communities); Petrović and Stakić (2018); Stankov *et al.*, (2019); Vukčević *et al.*, (2021) (contextual and psychological predictors of youth involvement in extremist activity).

## Methods

The lack of current empirical data on youth extremism gives the reason to organize and carry out scientific research to examine the attitudes to extremist activity among students of the Balashovsky Institute (branch) of the Federal State Educational Institution of Higher Vocational Education “Saratov National Research State University named after N.G. Chernyshevsky”.

To achieve the goal, the following objectives are set for the study:

- to determine the respondents’ attitudes to extremist ideology;
- to establish the most characteristic types of extremist activities;
- to identify the level of university students’ tolerance towards the representatives of other social groups of the population.

The sample consists of 520 full-time students at the age of 18 to 23 years old studying in the areas of “Pedagogical education”, “Psychological and pedagogical education”, and “Special (defectological) education”. The average age of the respondents is 19.7 years old.

The main research method employed in the study is a questionnaire. The structure of the questionnaire includes 23 open- and closed-ended questions grouped into several blocks:

1. Socio-demographic information about the respondent (gender, age, department, field of study, socio-economic status).
2. Attitudes toward members of various social groups: “Which social groups do you most dislike?”.
3. Establishing the level of ethnic tolerance (attitude towards people of a different race or ethnic group, towards one’s own ethnic group, assessment of cultural distance): “Do you know what nationalities live on the territory of your region or province? Name them”; “Does a person’s nationality matter to you when communicating with them?”; “Do you have friends, acquaintances, relatives of other nationalities?”; “What is your attitude towards people of other nationalities?”.
4. Establishing the level of social tolerance (attitudes toward minorities, people with mental disorders, the homeless, the unemployed, and other categories of the population): “Are there any social groups you dislike?”.
5. Understanding of the term “extremism”: “What do you understand by the term 'extremism'?”; “What actions are defined as extremism in the legislative acts of Russia?”; “Which of the following, in your opinion, is extremist?”

6. Identification of the causes of extremism: “Specify the reasons for the emergence of extremist attitudes and actions”.

7. Social groups most susceptible to extremist ideology: “What socio-demographic groups do you think are most susceptible to extremism?”

At the initial stage of the survey, students are sent an e-mail that met the research requirements. Participation in the survey is exclusively voluntary and anonymous. Initially, 548 people filled out the questionnaire, but 28 questionnaires were rejected during processing, leaving 520 questionnaires available for analysis. Data collection lasted from April through May 2021. All respondents were of legal age by the time of the survey, so the consent of legal representatives for the survey was not needed. Data processing is conducted using the SPSS 22.0 statistical software package providing valid data and clear results.

## Results and discussion

The respondents’ tolerance/intolerance for certain social groups is assessed through the question “What social groups dislike you the most?” allowing no more than three answer options to be selected (Table 1).

**Table 1** – Results of the study of tolerant/intolerant attitudes towards different social groups

Nº	Respondents’ answers	Quantitative indicator, in %
1.	people with drug and alcohol addictions	19.23%
2.	people with mental disorders	8.46%
3.	offenders/criminals/recidivists	13.65%
4.	homeless people	15.19%
5.	unemployed people	3.26%
6.	poor people	0.19%
7.	rich people	2.88%
8.	migrants from CIS countries (including illegal migrants)	1.15%
9.	people with a low level of education	5.19%
10.	people of sexual minorities	9.23%
11.	Politicians	2.19%
12.	Pensioners	0.76%
13.	national socialists/skinheads	5.31%
14.	people of another nationality/race	4.23%
15.	people of another religion	4.23%



16.	none of the above	18.84%
17.	Other	13.46%

Source: Prepared by the authors

Interpretation of the results of the study allows the respondents' answers to be conditionally grouped into four main clusters. University students have the greatest dislike for the so-called underground: people with alcohol and drug addiction; criminals and delinquents; homeless people. The second group consists of mentally ill/unstable people; people of sexual minorities and national socialists. The third group includes people of other nationalities and religions; the unemployed and the rich. The fourth group covers politicians, migrants, pensioners, and the poor. 18.84% of the respondents consider themselves to be tolerant, showing no hostility to any of the social groups. At the same time, 13.46% of the students offer their own answer options, among which appear "majorities" and "feminists", while the rest of the answers can be attributed to the categories already listed.

High levels of rejection of certain groups and an increase in social distance from them create conditions for the formation of certain types of extremism: ethnic, social, age, political, religious, and others.

A large proportion of students at the Balashov Institute understand extremism as: "inciting social, racial, national, or religious discord," "publication of Nazi paraphernalia and symbols," followed by "expression of extreme views on something" and "risky behavior," less frequently – as "propaganda and calls to overthrow the constitutional order and the current government" and "other," where respondents indicate the production and distribution of audiovisual and printed products that call for extremism and the creation and operation of extremist groups (Table 2).

**Table 2** – What do you understand by the term "extremism"?

Nº	Respondents' answers	Quantitative indicator, in %
1.	expression of extreme views on something	19.04%
2.	propaganda and calls to overthrow the constitutional order and the current government	12.69%
3.	publication of Nazi paraphernalia and symbols	21.73%
4.	inciting social, racial, national, or religious discord	25.96%
5.	risky behavior	16.35%
6.	other	4.23%

Fonte: Prepared by the authors

The data of our survey are supported by the results of the study “Extremism in the Assessments of Modern Youth in Moscow” conducted in 2017 among students from 18-25-year-old students at the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education (MSUPE) (n=225) using the survey method: 36% of the surveyed students associate extremism with sympathy for nationalistic, chauvinistic, and racist views; 25.5% – with incitement of interethnic, interreligious and other discord; 24% view extremism as extreme views and measures; 9% – as committing acts dangerous to human life for the purpose of obtaining emotional satisfaction; 2.5% – as the desire to change the world for the better, to protect one’s own people; and 3% of the respondents have difficulty answering the question (SAVCHENKO, 2018).

In the vast majority of cases, among the factors provoking the emergence and escalation of extremist sentiments, BI SSU students name social causes – poverty, unemployment, a strong social differentiation of the population by level and quality of life. In second place comes the global financial crisis, in third place – global political instability, followed by problems of international migration, distrust of authorities, and violation of constitutional rights of man and citizen (Table 3).

**Table 3 – Causes of extremism**

<b>Nº</b>	<b>Respondents’ answers</b>	<b>Quantitative indicator, in %</b>
1.	global political instability	10.38%
2.	the global economic crisis	14.80%
3.	social problems of the population (poverty, unemployment, social differentiation of the population by level and quality of life, etc.)	48.65%
4.	Russia’s migration policy to attract migrants	9.23%
5.	distrust of authorities	7.88%
6.	violation of the constitutional rights of man and citizen	9.06%

Source: Prepared by the authors

To the main reasons for involvement in extremist activities, the MSUPE students attribute the crisis of school education (40%), difficult family situation (23%), low level of legal literacy (56%). At the same time, such factors as propaganda of extremism in mass media, social inequality, and corruption are assessed by them as secondary or insignificant conditions for the formation of extremist communities.

The most popular answers of the BI SSU students to the question “What socio-demographic groups are most susceptible to extremism?” are the following categories: “youth/students”, “unemployed people”, “adolescents/schoolchildren”, “migrants”, the rarest choices are “the working population” and “pensioners” (Table 4).

**Table 4** – Which socio-demographic groups do you believe are most susceptible to extremism?

Nº	Respondents' answers	Quantitative indicator, in %
1.	adolescents/schoolchildren	20.19%
2.	youth/students	32.30%
3.	migrants	17.69%
4.	unemployed people	25.57%
5.	the working population	2.52%
6.	pensioners	1.73%

Source: Prepared by the authors

Analysis of the responses suggests that young people themselves see the vulnerability of their situation and critically assess the degree of exposure to outside influences and manipulation, including on the Internet. The working population and pensioners are not considered by them to be major participants in extremist movements, probably due to the employment of the former and the age, low mobility, and other interests of the latter.

The results obtained in our study are confirmed by a survey of Moscow student youth, which demonstrates that 79% of young people agree with the exceptional susceptibility of youth to extremism. Among the main reasons for the spread of extremism among young people, the respondents name low intelligence (31%), exposure to the influence of others (27%), and the peculiarities of young age (23%).

Over half of the respondents from the BI SSU, 69.23%, have not personally encountered any displays of extremism, 30.00% have had a single experience, and 11.15% report encountering such phenomena often.

In the study by Zinchenkoa, Pereyginab and Zotova (2016), (n=224) conducted using the method of focus groups among students aged 16-18 (n=97) living in Yekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk Oblast, as well as the method of free association (n=127), content analysis, and the Semantic Differential Scale, it is found that the vast majority of young people, 93%, have never encountered extremism; 95% of the respondents have not encountered discrimination

on the basis of nationality or religion and have not participated in religious or ethnic conflicts (ZINCHENKO; PERELYGINA; ZOTOVA, 2016).

In our study, every second BI SSU student, 53.84%, unequivocally condemns the actions of extremist nature in any form, 37.88% “rather condemn”, and 7.88% and 0.38% “rather approve” and “completely approve” of such actions, respectively. For comparison, in Yekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk Oblast, 67% of the focus group participants negatively assess the activities of extremist groups (ZINCHENKO; PERELYGINA; ZOTOVA, 2016).

In response to an open-ended question about measures to counteract extremism in adolescents and young adults, students of pedagogical specialties, studying at the BI SSU suggest the following techniques:

- regular monitoring of the level of tolerance among young people, including the use of sociological and psychological instruments;
- informing the younger generation about the types, forms, and causes of extremism and measures of safe behavior, including on the Internet, at debates, curatorial hours, conferences, and roundtables;
- organization of talks, open classes, cultural and sporting events on developing tolerance for people of other nationalities and religions as part of the prevention of extremist activity;
- special lessons and additional training courses;
- development and demonstration of theoretical and visual aids, etc.

Thus, the conducted survey demonstrates that the majority of BI SSU students show average and high levels of ethnic tolerance, which is explained by the relatively small share of migrants from CIS countries in the overall socio-demographic structure of the population in Saratov Oblast; the systematic state policy of interaction with national minorities and migrants (there are more than 30 national associations and cultural centers in the region; the regional national-cultural autonomy of Russian Germans of the Volga region and the city national-cultural autonomy of Saratov Tatars were created; the strategy of state national policy in Saratov Oblast for the period up to 2025 was developed and adopted for implementation); the educational work carried out in the organizations of general, secondary vocational, and professional education.

In order to prevent and counteract the spread of extremist ideology and the involvement of the younger generation in various radical organizations and communities, the additional educational program “Prevention of intolerance and extremism among young

people” amounting to 18 academic hours is developed for students at the BI SSU and introduced into the educational process of the university.

The content of the program includes such topics as “Basic concepts and essence of intolerance and extremism in youth environment”; “Normative-legal basis of counteraction to extremism and terrorism in the Russian Federation”; “Detection and prevention of intolerance and extremism in youth environment”; “Responsibility for offenses of extremist and terrorist nature”; “Actions of participants in the educational space at threat of extremist and terrorist acts”.

The results of the monitoring conducted after the implementation of the described program allow asserting its effectiveness as, firstly, the level of awareness of students of pedagogical specialties has increased significantly; secondly, the interest in the prevention of extremism as a social phenomenon has grown, which is expressed in the students’ choice of topics of essays, reports, and scientific articles; thirdly, in their practical training, the students carry out activities to counter extremism and increase tolerance in the general education schools of the city.

## **Conclusion**

The participation of young people in the activities of extremist organizations and movements and their loyal attitude to the ideology of extremism, especially in such a multinational, multi-confessional country as the Russian Federation and Saratov Oblast in particular, can have negative short-term and long-term consequences for the state, society, and individuals.

The results of the survey revealed a rather high level of tolerance of university students towards representatives of other nationalities and confessions; for the most part, the attitude towards migrants from CIS countries is neutral, and there is no tension in interethnic relations. The main factors provoking the rise of extremist sentiments are social and economic reasons and the most vulnerable groups susceptible to extremist ideology are young people and adolescents. At the same time, it can be argued that there are certain social groups that evoke resentment in the respondents, such as alcoholics, drug addicts, delinquents, and homeless people.

As part of countering extremism, it is necessary to systematically conduct and improve educational work among students on the basis of a practice-oriented approach with a wide coverage of the population to improve the effectiveness of upbringing activities.

The presented results of the study may be of use to teachers and specialists of educational institutions and social protection institutions, as well as employees of internal affairs bodies and non-governmental and public organizations.

What needs to be noted as the limitations of the study are the rather small sample size, the administration of the survey in one single university, and the lack of comparative data on foreign analogs, which calls for further interdisciplinary research with the use of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

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