

# COMPLICATED RELATIONS BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN IN THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONS WITH THE EU

Victoria GOREAINOV\*  
Mircea BRIE\*\*

**Abstract.** *Geographically and geopolitically, Armenia and Azerbaijan are located in the South Caucasus region or the Transcaucasia region, as it is often called. The geopolitical situation in this region is very dynamic, characterized by politico-military tensions and the clash of interstate and international interests. The South Caucasus region and the Black Sea and Caspian subregion are of major importance, given the transit of energy resources from the Caspian Basin and Central Asia.*

*Armenian-Azerbaijani relations constitute the main problematic direction in the foreign policy of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. From a legal point of view, these relations are practically absent, as both neighbouring states are neither at peace nor at war, there are no diplomatic, trade and economic relations between them.*

*Nagorno-Karabakh is a dispute over the province's status as a major source of tension between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the leadership of the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, in the mediation of which other international actors got involved, such as OSCE, the Minsk group consisting of France, the Russian Federation and the USA. In conclusion, it should be noted that the border of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, about 100 kilometers, is one of the most dangerous militarized areas in the vicinity of Europe.*

**Keywords:** *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, European Union, Russian Federation*

## 1. Introduction

Geographically and geopolitically, Armenia and Azerbaijan are located in the South Caucasus region or the Transcaucasia region, as it is often called. Transcaucasia is a geopolitical region located on the border between Eastern Europe and Southwest Asia, (Mulvey, 2000) in the southern part of the Caucasus Mountains, stretching from the southern border of Russia to Turkey, including the territories of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The geopolitical situation in this region is very dynamic, characterized by politico-military tensions and the clash of interstate and international interests. The South Caucasus region and the Black Sea and Caspian subregion are of major importance, given the transit of energy resources from the Caspian Basin and Central Asia (Галстян, 2011: 127). Thus,

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\* PhD Student, Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of European Studies, Institute for Doctoral Studies, Doctoral School: European Paradigm, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, E-mail: victoriagoreainov@gmail.com

\*\* Professor PhD University of Oradea, mbrie@uoradea.ro.

Azerbaijan and Armenia are in the centre of the geopolitical interests of the world and regional powers, given the strategic geographical location in the Caspian Sea region.

## **2. The geopolitical context and the interests of Armenia and Azerbaijan**

### **Armenia**

In the geopolitical context, Armenia is a small country, whose security and economic development depends on foreign relations. Armenia's geopolitical position is quite difficult because some neighbouring states have an unfriendly policy towards it. Armenia's role and place on the geopolitical picture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are conditioned by the complex history of the Armenian people.

After the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the restoration of the independence of the Republic of Armenia, the country was drawn into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which dictated its foreign policy agenda, as the issue of conflict resolution remained a key area of Armenia's foreign policy (Атоян, 2015: 98).

Of special interest to Armenia is the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation is a strategic partner of major importance for Armenia. Of all the three states in the South Caucasus, Armenia has the closest economic and politico-military relations with Russia. Thus, under the current conditions, relations with Russia are strategic for Armenia's national security. According to Armenia's National Security Strategy 2020, Armenia's foreign policy priorities and the expansion of strategic cooperation relations with the Russian Federation in the political, trade, economic, military, cultural and humanitarian fields are among the top priorities (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia 2020).

It is obvious that Armenia's decision to join the Eurasian Customs Union was taken, based on the security aspect, the Russian Federation being the guarantor of Armenia's security. In Armenia, complementarity as a principle of implementation of the external security strategy is stipulated in the National Security Strategy of Armenia. (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia 2020).

Armenia's choice to cooperate with Russia is also determined by the fight against threats to territorial integrity in the context of the unresolved conflict in Nagorno Karabakh and the prevention of economic and political isolation in the region (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia 2020).

The military cooperation between Russia and Armenia is close, as since 1995, on the territory of Armenia officially operates Military Base 102 of the Russian Federation, and the Armenian military together with the Russian ones defend the border of the country (Эламирян, 2020). Economically, Russia is Armenia's main trading partner with a share of 27.51% in Armenia's trade in 2019 (Отчёт о внешней торговле между Россией и Арменией в 2019 году, 2020).

It should be noted that Armenia, with strong ties to Russia, often subordinates its foreign policy to Russia's priorities. The country is dependent on Russian economic support and the Russian military presence (the Russians, in the context of the conflict with Azerbaijan, with the approval of Armenia until 2044, maintain more than 5,000 troops at the Gyumri base) (Ionescu, 2014).

Another important factor is that Russia has the largest Armenian diaspora in the world - 1, 18 million, according to 2010 data (Социально-демографический портрет России, 2012: 72). It should be noted that over several years, the two countries have concluded more than 250 interstate, intergovernmental and interdepartmental treaties and

agreements, including the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance of 29 August 1997, which regulates bilateral relations in all areas of cooperation (Bilateral Relations, Russia). At the same time, to Russia, Armenia is also of interest in the South Caucasus, which is its traditional “outpost” in this region. In addition, Armenia serves as the main basis for resisting NATO and Turkey’s entry into the region.

The next priority of Armenia’s foreign policy is cooperation with the United States of America in the field of reforms, strengthening democracy and defending human rights. Armenia’s geographical and geopolitical position has determined the US interest in this country. The United States is practically the largest donor of humanitarian and technical assistance to Armenia (Bilateral Relations, United States of America). At the same time, the US is the second largest diaspora in the United States. It should be noted that Armenia is also cooperating with NATO, participating in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The cooperation with the European Union (EU) is in third place in the list of foreign policy priorities in Armenia’s 2020 National Security Strategy. Cooperation relations between Armenia and the EU are based on the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, signed in November 2017 and provisionally implemented in June 2018, pending ratification by all EU Member States (Jiráček, Carmona). This agreement deepens bilateral relations in various fields, while still honouring Armenia’s membership within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The European Union is the second largest trading partner after Russia and accounts for about 20% of Armenia’s total trade (2019 data) (European Union, Trade in goods with Armenia). EU support to Armenia comes mainly under the European Neighborhood Instrument, i.e. over EUR 200 million in the period 2017-2020, and as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, EU support has been substantially restructured and a total amount of EUR 92 million has been allocated to meet current needs. At the same time, the Eastern Partnership opened for Armenia several perspectives of collaboration, bringing the country closer to the European political and economic model.

Armenia’s interest in participating in the Eastern Partnership was due to a number of factors (Prioritățile Parteneriatului dintre Uniunea Europeană și Armenia, 2017: 5-12) such as:

- Worsening relations between Russia and Georgia as a result of the conflict in South Ossetia have negatively affected the economic situation in Armenia;
- The cessation of relations between Russia and Georgia has also called into question Armenia’s energy security. Due to the 2008 conflict, Georgia has reduced the supply of Russian gas to Armenia. Given that one of the main areas of cooperation between the EU and partner countries is the improvement of energy security mechanisms, Yerevan officials understood that it is quite important to participate in the EaP Program;
- The development of integration processes with the EU corresponded to Armenia’s interests in diversifying the country’s external economic activity;
- Deepening cooperation between Armenia and the EU was seen as necessary to balance political, energy, telecommunications and banking dependence on the Russian Federation.

Given the geographical position, the blockade and the policy of isolation from Turkey and Azerbaijan, the development of relations with neighbours such as Georgia and Iran is of particular importance to Armenia. Economic cooperation between Georgia and Armenia largely includes the transit of goods from Russia to

Armenia and vice versa, passing through the territory of Georgia. However, Georgia is not a strategic partner for Armenia. Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and a strategic partner of Russia, and Georgia in its turn aims to get closer to the EU, NATO and has a strategic partnership with Turkey and Azerbaijan (Минасян, 2020). In this sense, the political visions of these two countries are different.

It should be noted that the Armenian diaspora, which is very large in the world, is of great importance for Armenia's foreign policy and interests. The Armenian Diaspora, which is about 7 million in the world (Armenian Diaspora Communities), influential people of Armenian origin and various national organizations is an important "soft power" of Armenia.

Regarding other interests and priorities of Armenia, here we can highlight the development of cooperation with France, Germany, Greece, Cyprus, China, India and other countries (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia 2020).

### **Azerbaijan**

The Republic of Azerbaijan is the largest state in the South Caucasus region (86.6 thousand sq. km) and the richest, with a population of 10,067,100 inhabitants (Republic of Azerbaijan). Compared to its neighbouring country Armenia, Azerbaijan's geographical and geopolitical position is very successful. In the context of balancing power in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, rich in energy resources, plays an important role in the region. The geographical location of the country on the East-West and North-South energy corridors, at the intersection of major trade routes, offers Azerbaijan a favorable opportunity to become an important center in terms of energy and infrastructure (Мамедъяров).

Azerbaijan's natural resources, in addition to influencing the country's prosperity and people's well-being, are also an important factor in strengthening national security, political independence and the sovereignty of the republic. Azerbaijan's advantageous geographical position is determined by the fact that the country serves as a route for oil and gas transportation from the entire Caspian Basin to the west (Гаджиев, 2019: 99). Azerbaijan is at the center of the geopolitical interests of the major global and regional powers due to its geographical position.

Azerbaijan's strategic position in the South Caucasus region has determined the important role of the country in international, diplomatic and trade relations. Given the historical heritage of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the specifics of the geopolitical position, the multi-faceted and balanced foreign policy strategy was developed, based on national interests, which is still valid today (Мамедъяров, 2017: 18).

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is based on the country's national interests. One of the most important strategic documents in determining the course of Azerbaijan's foreign policy is the 2007 National Security Concept. The National Security Concept describes Azerbaijan's national interests, threats to national security and the main directions of the country's national security policy (National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2007). Azerbaijan's main directions for securing foreign policy include restoring territorial integrity, integrating into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, and cooperating with international organizations (Аватков, 2020: 121). Geopolitically, Azerbaijan has built a foreign policy based on the logic of a diplomatic oscillation between Russia and the EU, but also between Iran, the USA and Turkey.

Taking a direction towards modernization and intensively developing political, economic and humanitarian relations with the EU, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, NATO, the USA and with several European states, Azerbaijan sees its geopolitical future

in the family of European countries. At the same time, Azerbaijan is developing mutually beneficial and cooperative relations with the CIS states and the Russian Federation (Дарабади). Today, Azerbaijan is trying to fully take advantage of the globalization process for further economic development and prosperity.

Azerbaijan pays special attention to bilateral relations with foreign states, including neighbouring states. In this sense, Azerbaijan's relations with Turkey, which is also a strategic partner, are special and very important. Turkey was the first country to recognize the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan and has so far provided support in various fields. It is very important for Azerbaijan that the Turkish side has always supported its position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Between these two countries there are close relations of economic and energy cooperation.

Given the earlier conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Azerbaijan was forced to move even closer to Turkey, to which it felt close in terms of the mutual sympathies inherited from the common Islamic culture and religion. The two states signed the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support in 2010 (Azərbaycan Respublikası və Türkiyə Respublikası arasında strateji tərəfdaşlıq və qarşılıqlı yardım haqqında). Turkey, by this treaty, undertakes to support the Azerbaijanis by any means, including the military. The proximity to Turkey also facilitated some openness to the United States. Russia's military cooperation and geopolitical common position with Iran have led Azerbaijan to further strengthen relations with Turkey as a strategic ally (Gerasymchuk, Matiychyk, Nantoi, Platon, 2013: 29).

Turkey, together with Italy and the Russian Federation, are Azerbaijan's main trading partners (Аббасова, 2017: 76). Important pipelines pass through the territory of Turkey, through which Azerbaijan gas and oil are delivered to Europe (Колесниченко, 2011: 66). Cooperation with Turkey is also very close in the military. To this end, Turkey is providing financial assistance to Azerbaijan in the sphere of defence.

An important direction of Azerbaijan's foreign policy represents bilateral relations with Iran. Contemporary bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Iran are not simple, but they are developing quite intensively, even if there are several problems. It should be mentioned that in Iran there is the large Azerbaijani diaspora, about 16 million Azerbaijanis (Азербайджанский вопрос в Иране, 2019). Thus, almost 16% of Iran's population constitutes of ethnic Azerbaijanis (Ибрагимов, 2012: 61). Although Iran has close cooperation with Armenia, the country officially supports the Azerbaijani side in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

An important regional partner of Azerbaijan is Georgia. The countries largely cooperate at the regional level in the field of energy, economy and transport. Thus, the main transport routes of Azerbaijani energy resources to Turkey and further to Europe pass through Georgia. According to statistics for 2020, Azerbaijan is Georgia's fourth largest economic partner (Азербайджан четвертый внешнеторговый партнер Грузии в 2020 году, 2021).

Of particular importance to Azerbaijan is the Russian Federation. Azerbaijan is cooperating with Russia on the basis of the 1997 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Security (Договор о дружбе, 1998). There are close ties between these states in several areas. However, in the bilateral relations of these countries there are also unresolved issues, such as the division of the Caspian Sea (Внешнеполитические приоритеты Азербайджана, 2019).

A strategic partner for Azerbaijan is the United States. Azerbaijan is part of the US-led international counterterrorism coalition and actively supports the fight against terrorism (Внешняя политика Азербайджана: действенные факторы и приоритеты, 2009).

Cooperation with the EU plays an important role in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Since gaining independence, the country has built cooperative relations with the EU, especially in the field of energy.

Among the important interests of Azerbaijan in the EaP are:

- Energy and energy security cooperation – ensuring a favourable geopolitical climate so that Azerbaijani oil can reach from the Caspian region to the Mediterranean through the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) pipeline, which runs from Azerbaijan through Georgia to the Mediterranean region in Turkey, being opened in 2005 and has a capacity of 1 million barrels per day (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline);
- Transport security;
- Economic development;
- Preservation of the specific position of neutrality of Azerbaijan, without any accession guidelines to either the EU or the Eurasian Customs Union.

### **3. Armenia's bilateral relations with Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**

Bilateral diplomatic relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are not established (Bilateral Relations). Armenian-Azerbaijani relations constitute the main problematic direction in the foreign policy of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. From a legal point of view, these relations are practically absent, as both neighbouring states are neither at peace nor at war, there are no diplomatic, trade and economic relations between them.

The Nagorno-Karabakh region is an enclave within Azerbaijan. In 1989, the population of the region was about 189,000, of which 76.9% were Armenians and 21.5% Azerbaijanis, and the rest were Russians, Ukrainians and others (Băhnăreanu, 2016: 10). Armenia considers Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) to be a part of historical Armenia (Avakian, 2015: 8).

The roots of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are very old, and the contemporary stage of the conflict began in 1988, when the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region declared that it would leave the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. On December 28, 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh proclaimed itself a republic, and in the subsequent period it fought for independence with the new state of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani side did not accept the declaration, unlike Armenia, and imposed direct presidential control over the enclave. As a result, heavy fighting broke out between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. The conflict has allowed Karabakh-Armenian forces to regain control of Nagorno-Karabakh, leaving Azerbaijan with about 15% less territory (Межгосударственные отношения Армении и Азербайджана, 2015).

Thus, by 1994, according to some data, more than 30,000 people had been killed and more than one million displaced (Что случилось в Нагорном Карабахе, 2020).

In March 1992, at an OSCE conference, the Minsk Group, consisting of France, the Russian Federation and the United States, was established. After a period of negotiations, on 4-5 May 1994, the delegates of the Commonwealth of Independent States agreed on a ceasefire protocol and the deployment of a peacekeeping force. On July 27, 1994, the agreement was extended indefinitely, with the signing of it by the defence ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the military leader of Nagorno-Karabakh (Что случилось в Нагорном Карабахе, 2020).

After the ceasefire negotiated in 1994, Nagorno-Karabakh exists as an internationally unrecognized region, but supported by Armenia. Since 1994, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been a “frozen” conflict until the resumption of military activities between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in April 2016 for a period of about 5 days. Although a ceasefire agreement was reached in 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan frequently accuse each other of attacks in this enclave and along the border between the two states.

The conflict between the two countries escalated in July 2020. Armenia and Azerbaijan have made mutual allegations of ceasefire violations. On September 27, 2020, military actions between the Armenian and Azerbaijani forces were resumed, which continued until November 10, 2020, and several thousand people were killed on both sides. Armenia was the first to declare a state of war, followed by Azerbaijan, but in the latter it was done so only in certain parts of the country. The two states blame each other for this serious deterioration of the situation (Конфликт Азербайджана и Армении, 2020).

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is of particular importance to the Russian Federation and Turkey. Armenia’s traditional ally in this conflict is Russia. Moscow and Yerevan are very close. Both peoples are closely connected, including through the Orthodox Christian faith. In fact, Armenia is one of the former Soviet republics that are loyal to Russia. Both are part of the Eurasian Economic Union. The two countries are also military partners. Russia has a base in Gyumri, Armenia, and Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a post-Soviet military alliance. However, in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Moscow does not position itself as an ally of Armenia, but as a mediator within the OSCE (Armenia și Azerbaidjanul acceptă încetarea focului în Nagorno-Karabah, 2020).

According to information gathered by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and published in 2020, Russia has been providing all Armenian arms imports for the past five years. In the same period, however, the Russians are the second largest supplier of arms to Azerbaijan, with 31% of imports, after Israel (60%). (Ce se ascunde în spatele conflictului dintre azeri și armeni, 2020).

Turkey, on the other hand, supports Azerbaijan based on the “two states, one nation” formula. While cultivating ties with Azerbaijan, Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Armenia and the border between the two countries has been hermetically closed since 1993, and Ankara refuses to acknowledge the Armenian genocide. To strengthen military relations with Azerbaijan, Turkey has been involved in recruiting Syrian fighters from Idlib province and equipping the Azerbaijani army with drones that have been used in conflicts in Syria or Libya (Семь вопросов к миру в Карабахе).

Azerbaijan’s position was strengthened by its alliance with Turkey, especially considering Erdogan’s rule. Ankara and Baku have strong cultural relations, based on the common Turkish heritage. Turkey has started buying less gas from Gazprom and more from Socar. Thus, the mounting tension between the two neighbours in the Caucasus also comes in the context of competition between Turks and Russians in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Libya and Syria, where their geostrategic interests are divergent. As a result, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed an agreement under Russian auspices to end hostilities in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which marks Azerbaijan’s military victories after six weeks of fighting. The agreement entered into force on 10 November 2020.

Under the agreement, Azerbaijan will retain the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas that it captured during the conflict. Azerbaijan has also called on Armenian forces to hand over some areas it owns outside the Nagorno-Karabakh

border, including the eastern district of Agdam and the western part of Kalbajar (Армения и Азербайджан очертили границы отношений, 2021).

Armenians will also lose the region of Lachin, where a crucial road connects Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. The agreement stipulates that a 5-kilometer-wide area in the so-called Lachin corridor will remain open and be protected by about 2,000 Russian peacekeepers. Shortly after the agreement was announced, thousands of angry protesters gathered in front of the Armenian government headquarters, and hundreds of them stormed the premises, breaking windows and robbing offices, including a council chamber. Thus, after the 6-week war with Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, concluded with a ceasefire agreement, Armenia is entering an uncertain period due to internal political unrest and a serious humanitarian situation. This war has been the most violent clash since the ceasefire agreed in 1994 and meant Armenia's loss of control over part of Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent Azerbaijani districts it had controlled for 26 years (Jiráček, Carmona, 2020).

Azerbaijan's victory in the six-week war in Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, in which it enjoyed unconditional support from Turkey, a faithful ally, further strengthened President Aliyev's position, despite the country's economic difficulties. Following the ceasefire agreement, Azerbaijan regained control of districts adjacent to the Nagorno-Karabakh region that it had not controlled for more than 26 years, as well as part of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Negotiations are needed to identify a lasting solution to this conflict and to clarify the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Meanwhile, Russian peacekeeping forces have been mobilized to monitor the armistice.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In conclusion, we can mention that Armenia has tense relations with its neighbours Azerbaijan and Turkey, given the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and complicated relations with Turkey. Tense relations with Turkey are old and have their origins in Ottoman rule over Armenia. The atrocities committed by the Ottomans during the First World War left a strong imprint on the Armenian conscience. Turkey has not offered to respond positively to demands for apologies and financial compensation to the victims of what they call "Armenian genocide". Tense relations with Azerbaijan are caused by the territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia has close ties with the Russian Federation and often subordinates its foreign policy to Russia's priorities, being dependent on Russian economic support and military presence. Being dependent on Russia, in the absence of any alternative, Armenia promotes a policy oriented towards Russia, perceiving such a type of dependence as a beneficial protectorate from a great power.

Azerbaijan is a Muslim country that has close contacts with the Islamic world, while being influenced by neighbouring Christian countries oriented towards Western culture. Its position at the intersection of West and East has allowed Azerbaijan to develop a symbiosis of values of both cultures. Azerbaijan wants to benefit from cooperation with the European Union, but also to impose a Russian-style model in its domestic policy.

Moreover, Azerbaijan is implementing a policy of balancing not only between Russia and the EU, but also between Iran, the USA and Turkey. While Turkey is strongly supported by the US, Iran and the Russian Federation are cooperating in the military and political fields, trying to withstand the growing weight of Turkey and the US in the Caspian Basin.



Azerbaijan has chosen Turkey as a strategic ally, and Armenia, in turn, is working closely with Iran, having hostile relations with Turkey. However, the chance for maneuvers is guaranteed to Azerbaijan by the natural resources it has at its disposal.

Azerbaijan can afford a position of 'armed neutrality'. On the one hand, it is close to the EU and the US, providing its natural resources to the European market. On the other hand, it assesses quite realistically the impact of the Russian Federation on European policies and avoids any confrontation with Moscow, although it does not express any desire to develop relations as close as Armenia.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a dispute over the province's status as a major source of tension between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the leadership of the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, in the mediation of which other international actors got involved, such as OSCE, the Minsk group consisting of France, the Russian Federation and the USA. In conclusion, it should be noted that the border of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, about 100 kilometers, is one of the most dangerous militarized areas in the vicinity of Europe.

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