

***THE MIGRATION IN ROMANIA DURING THE COMMUNIST REGIME. CASE STUDY: ACTORS AND DIRECTORS WHO CHOSE FREEDOM BETWEEN THE TWO EUROPEAN TOURS OF THE NATIONAL THEATER IN CLUJNAPOCA (1970-1981)***

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**Abstract:** *Arts and Culture are excellent vehicles to promote national identity, even more in totalitarian society where every dimension of social and professional life serves to legitimate the regime. Privileged by their status in the communist society, the connection between artists and ideology evolved in a more controversial way during Ceauşescu's reign. The paper proposal takes into consideration aspects of the migration phenomenon in Romania, in the field of theater. Our issue study is based on the particular case of Cluj-Napoca's National Theater between two of its most important international tours: the Italian one from the 1970 and the FRG tour in 1981. The first one was organized by director Vlad Mugur, head manager of the National in Cluj, just on the brake of the Stalinist comeback in Culture. The second one, led by playwright Constantin Cubleşan, the executive of the Theater at the time, in 1981 concludes a decade of profound changes and personnel dynamics as the rate of employees who fled Romania's worsening welfare, was characterized by an increasing trend.*

*The research methodology will analyse the general context in the Arts and Performance dimension of cultural life and its relation with the former Secret Police (Securitate) structures. The study points to a series of particular cases of migrants who decided not to return in their home country after experiencing the oportunities of the free world or due to other professional and recreational breakthroughs. We will investigate the case of Vlad Mugur, as portrayed in its Securitate file, but also the cases of actors Alexandru Munte and Gitta Popovici whom decided to defect during the Italian tour. The majority of our research material will be represented by contextual analisis of the CNSAS file regarding the subjects involved and mentioned above.*

**Keywords:** *Romanian theater, communism, Diaspora, Arts, secret police*

Similar to other European countries, the Romanian authorities have tried to discourage emigration especially by means of imposing legislative measures that intensified by the late 60's, during the last 20 years of the regime. The sharp regression from the liberalization of the social mobility towards a more aggressive limitation of the freedom of movement rights coincided with the period of relative openness to Western countries manifested by the communist society, which had attained a consolidated maturity following its 25 years of

existence. Professional visits, temporary study residences, the acceptance of scholarships or trips abroad seemed to confirm, prior to the onset of the harsh ideology of 1971, the hypothesis of a new Eastern civilization<sup>1</sup> which reached a certain level of welfare other than by means of capitalism. The intellectuals, especially the ones involved in arts and humanities, were to benefit the most from these exchange programs. These guilds were nonetheless pursued by the Securitate officers who wanted to unveil informal networks suspected of undermining the legitimacy of the Ceausescu regime in Romania from the West or within the country but under the hidden influence of the West.

Even though the surveillance actions carried out by the Securitate were linked to increasing tensions between Eastern and Western society in the second part of the Cold War<sup>2</sup>, the tracks followed were, in most cases, expanded episodes, at times invented, and having no further consequences on a national scale. The common thread of the surveillance information files used in the 70s was the obsession with the dissent organized by Radio Free Europe, transmitting from Munich, Germany. To justify the considerable amount of resources involved in their surveillance, the secret police dwelled in the myth of the fortress besieged by both outside and inside *elements*, cultivating in this way the public suspicion towards minorities. The enhancement of the constant check-ups that the intellectuals and artists were subjected to were justified on the grounds that they were citizens that, along with class athletes, were the most to have professional cross-border links and to travel abroad.

The present research puts forward an analysis of artists' emigration, based on two case studies carried out in the context of first international tours of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca. We have established the time reference as encompassing the time span between the first important international tour organized in Italy by Theater Company in Cluj in 1970 and the last tour in West Germany which took place in 1981. The study examines the documents discovered in the archives of the National Council for Research on Securitate Archives (CNSAS) and corroborates published information found in memoirs with unpublished data from interviews conducted by the author.

Based on the studied documents we can infer that what the main concern of the Securitate were the ties between the artists and intellectuals in the country with the Romanian

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<sup>1</sup>The theory of Stalinism as a civilization belong to Stephen K. Kotkin. Stephen K. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See Stejarel Olaru, Georg Herbstritt, *STASI și Securitatea*, Humanitas Publishing House, 2005, *passim*.

artists or writers who chose, starting with the second half of the 70s, to live in exile<sup>3</sup>. Under the legislation on travelling abroad after 1978<sup>4</sup>, the decision to emigrate was not considered to be a civil right available to any citizen, but, if approved, an administrative concession made by the state under exceptional circumstances and on the grounds of ‘family reunification’<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, staying abroad falls under criminal law, and is considered an offense connected to that of treason. It wasn’t the exceptional cases, nor the renowned artists and intellectuals that conferred a dramatic feel to the emigration phenomenon during 1970-1989 in Romania, but the increasing number of departures and stays, along with the worsening economic context, which offered a degrading standard of living. Statistics show that during the late 80s, Romania was one of the major migration sources in the East-West European system, the number of Romanian citizens that applied for a refugee status in Western countries increasing from 2,864 in 1980 to 14,864 in 1989<sup>6</sup>.

Having previously left the country on tours, artists and intellectuals had developed personal networks able to offer, at least at the beginning, the support needed in order to flee from a communist country (host, accommodation, a professional perspective). For a number of them, Radio Free Europe took on the role of a social worker, providing not only a forum for exercising freedom of speech and recovery of dignity, but also the necessary financial means for a life that had to start from scratch<sup>7</sup>. For most, however, personal relationships, family, or, where appropriate, the ethnic communities (as were the Saxons from West Germany, Hungarians in Malmo - Sweden, the Jewish community in USA or Israel) were the main means that made legal stay (arranged marriages, paying compensation to the Romanian state) or illegal stay possible. At the end of the 8th decade, Romanian ideologists unleashed a furious offensive against the Diaspora, and also against the host countries which they accused

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<sup>3</sup> ACNSAS, D 01725, *Plan de măsuri privind îmbunătățirea activității informativ-operative de securitate pe anul 1983 în problema Activitatea dușmănoasă desfășurată de unele persoane din sectoarele de cultură și artă*, f. 21

<sup>4</sup> Every citizen travelling abroad after 1978 was checked based on two sets of laws called ‘Alfa’ and ‘Atlas’. According to the norms established by the aforementioned laws, anyone requesting a passport was offered counter-espionage training. The secret police officers organized group or individual meetings for the travelers and presented them the importance of keeping state secrets and the risks they run in case they fail to do so. Stejărel Olaru, Georg Herbstritt, *Stasi și Securitatea*, Humanitas Publishing House, 2005, p. 176

<sup>5</sup> Istvan Horvath, *Aspecte ale culturii migrației în România*, în R.G. Anghel, I. Horvath (coord.), *Sociologia migrației, teorii și studii de caz românești*, Polirom Publishing House, 2009, p. 156

<sup>6</sup> Istvan Horvath, *op.cit.*, p. 156

<sup>7</sup> Vlad Mugur mentions that he was offered by the Free Europe radio station 400 dollars per show, for a series of 10 shows about the July Theses. Florica Ichim, *La vorbă cu Vlad Mugur*, Teatrul azi magazine Publishing House, Bucharest 2000, p. 134

of the West of ‘reverse transfer of technology’ from underdeveloped countries to developed ones, the ‘trafficking of intelligence’<sup>8</sup> with specialists for whom poorer countries were making huge efforts to educate for the benefit of capitalist countries which took advantage of their knowledge, free of charge.

A report<sup>9</sup> of 1984 shows, for example, the way in which informal professional opportunities were created between various intellectuals from Romania and the Western countries. For musicians, ‘among the bodies which insist on attracting young talent is the Committee for the Organization of the International Music Festival in Bayreuth – Germany’. As far as the writers are concerned, the communication served both the interests of several institutions in the country and abroad: ‘(...) we illustrate the way in which some emigration elements working at Radio Free Europe, contact Romanian citizens and address problems they present. ‘Lucian’, a writer, was invited to travel to West Germany for some conferences in 1982. On his return he reported that he was contacted by Maier Gabanyi Anneliese, collaborator at Radio Free Europe from which he learned that the leadership of this station uses the West German cultural institutions and particularly the ‘Institute of South-Eastern European Studies’ in Munich in order to invite some Romanian artists and intellectuals. This was also the case of the writer ‘Osanu’<sup>10</sup> from Cluj, whose nonconformist literary activity was encouraged by the above mentioned radio station and who was invited to travel to Germany in 1982. Maier Gabanyi Anneliese stated that this radio station has the opportunity to influence the institute regarding the person to be invited to Germany and even determine to issue a warning, that if the nominal invitations were turned down no further invitations would be sent in the future<sup>11</sup>. Documents certify that between 1978-1984, 1,912 people in Cluj-Napoca travelled abroad for business purposes. Most of them (1,796) responded to invitations for cultural exchanges, as was the case with the 1981 tour in Germany undertaken by the National Theatre in Cluj. The main destinations were countries such as West Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Finland, Greece and England. ‘The majority’, as the cited report reads, represented ‘people of value in different cultural and artistic fields’ instrumentalists and choristers (374 people), ballet dancers (80 people), writers (31 people) followed by teachers

<sup>8</sup> Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Cultura lui Ceaușescu*, Polirom Publishing House, 2003, p. 272-273

<sup>9</sup> ANCSAS, D 016539, vol 1, Analysis note „Concluziile ce se desprind asupra modului cum sunt lucrate informativ persoanele din mediile cultural-artistice, care au beneficiat de burse sau invitații acordate de organisme sau instituții din Occident”, no. 164/TV of March 1984, f. 307 recto/verso

<sup>10</sup> Augustin Buzura

<sup>11</sup> ANCSAS, D 016539, vol 1 Analysis note ‘Concluziile ce se desprind asupra modului cum sunt lucrate informativ persoanele din mediile cultural-artistice, care au beneficiat de burse sau invitații acordate de organisme sau instituții din Occident’, no. 164/TV of March 1984, f. 307 recto/verso

(35 people). Of those who officially travelled to the Western countries during this period (of which 442 persons in 1983, AN), the number of those who never returned after completing their mission is of 31 people<sup>12</sup>, 8 of which remained abroad between 1981-1983.

<p><b>TABLE 1. The purpose of the official travels abroad between 1978-1984 undertaken by the intellectuals residing in Cluj, acc. to Report no.164/TV of 1984, D 016539, vol.1, p. 306-307</b></p>	<p><b>TABLE 2. Record of illegal stays abroad between 1981-1983, acc. to the theater operational situation analysis of March 28, 1983, ACNSAS (National Council for the Research of the Securitate's Archives), D 017257, p. 29</b></p>																												
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### Zigy Munte and Gitta Popovici's stay in Italy (1970)

In 1968, Vlad Mugur, who had been a director of the National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca for four years managed to take the theater company abroad, the first time since its establishment. This endeavour also served to explore the international market and its openness to contemporary Romanian drama. The group of actors who were part of the delegation who took part in the Arezzo Festival in Italy was made up of eight people distributed in performances such as 'Visul'(The Dream) by D.R. Popescu and 'Rochia'(The Dress) by R. Vulpescu<sup>13</sup>. The Italian tour of the spring of 1970, part of the *Romanian Week* at Prato, was thoroughly prepared by the authorities. Besides a series of performances of 'Un vis din noaptea miezului de vară' (A Midsummer Night's Dream) directed by Vlad Mugur, the Italian

<sup>12</sup> ACNSAS, D 016539, vol.1, f. 306-307

<sup>13</sup> *Teatrul Național Cluj-Napoca 1919-1994. Teatrul Românesc din Transilvania 240 de ani. Studiu Monografic*, Volume published by the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, 1994, p.175

city witnessed an exhibition of books published in Romania, discs and photos of performances in Cluj and a folk ensemble concert which included, among others, Dumitru Fărcaș and Gheorghe Turda. According to the chroniclers of the time, the plays achieved a great public success. Upon their return, two of the actors in the cast, Alexandru Munte also known as Ziggy, and Gitta Popovici, were missing. Vlad Mugur evokes the time he became aware of their disappearance: ‘We had gathered at the train station in Milan. The train entered the platform. Two of us were missing - Gitta Popovici and Ziggy Munte. We waited but they didn’t show up. I understood then why Gitta had so dearly embraced me after the last show in Genoa (...) I tried to phone them and looked for them in hotels, theaters, embassies. No sign of them whatsoever.’<sup>14</sup>

The two actors were kept under scrutiny by the Securitate and part of the surveillance sheets and description notes that were subsequently drafted can be found in the National Theatre file. Criminal case file 1243/1970 would be soon opened, accusing them of treason for their refusal to return to their country and a distraint was imposed upon the entire personal property (...) ‘On April 8, 1970, Munte Alexandru and his friend, Popovici Clara Gita left the country while on tour in Italy together with the artistic team of the National Theatre of Cluj. On the morning of April 26, 1970, following the last performance in Genoa, the team left the city to return to their country. On departure from Genoa, the accused Munte Alexandru and Popovici Clara Gita were absent and did not board the train.’<sup>15</sup>

Gitta Popovici was married to an editing director working for Televiziunea Română (The Romanian Television Corporation) in Bucharest, while Alexandru Munte was, according to an information note drafted by the source Pius Leon, a friend of actor Harry Baranga, the famous playwright’s son<sup>16</sup>, residing in France. The cited document further states that they intended to settle in France or in Israel where some of the relatives of Gitta Popovici were residing. The information was revealed in a letter lacking the sender’s address sent by Alexandru Munte to his relatives in Bucharest. The investigation that followed failed to identify any solid political reasons for their expatriation. The two had skillfully kept their plans of expatriation secret.

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<sup>14</sup> F. Ichim, *op.cit.*, , p. 112-115

<sup>15</sup> ACNSAS, 017257, f. 302

<sup>16</sup> In the mentioned documents the name appears to be spelled incorrectly as Hary Baranca instead of Harry Banga but the further details confirm his identity. The person in question is the son of Aurel Baranga, who refused to return to the country following several trips to France. ACNSAS, D 017257, f. 341

In addition, the note reads that Alexandru Munte did not ‘leave the key to his apartment in Cluj’<sup>17</sup>, he has recently bought a (radio) transistor that could give to his mother, but left everything in the room. He also bought some items of clothing, a new duvet and others, all were left in his apartment in Cluj (...) In discussions with his mother, Munte over time reported having some problems related to his work at the National Theatre of Cluj, as the director had canceled two shows in which him and Gita had the lead roles’<sup>18</sup>. On the sides of the document, senior lieutenant M. Gy. notes that Alexandru Munte maintained correspondence with Harry Baranga. From the letters received and whose content is revealed by the Securitate officer, we find out that the two friends met in Italy during the tournament. Another source, Denfai, completes the overall picture of the departure of Alexandru Munte, stating that the latter ‘defies and mocks the older actors - insults the young on their profession – regarding himself as the best actor of the theater’.

The note was handed by someone who is obviously in bad terms with Alexandru Munte who, we are told, was widely disliked by the theater staff. He is also said to have stated ‘Under a different regime my talent would have been much more appreciated. Our contemporary dramaturgy – left at the mercy of incompetent people - smothers young talents’<sup>19</sup>. One possible explanation that we put forward is that these insights could have been provided by someone who was part of the team that travelled to Italy and who did so in order to be exempt from any possible suspicion of complicity.

Gitta Popovici had been one of the stars of the Italian tour where, according to Vlad Mugur, she was highly acclaimed for her performance as Puck in ‘Un vis din noaptea miezului de vară’. ‘Her success was not only due to her extraordinary talent but also to the mischievous look she had in portraying Puck, the tender movements of her body resembling a willow in the wind and also to her perfect Italian pronunciation’<sup>20</sup>. Gitta Popovici also known as Gitta Munte had indeed emigrated to Israel where she managed to capitalize on her acting skills<sup>21</sup>.

### **The Vlad Mugur Case (1971)**

Shortly after his return from the Italian tour, Vlad Mugur decided to emigrate in 1971 to the country that welcomed him with arms wide open. While on a leisure trip in Italy, accompanied by actress Magda Stief as well as playwright D.R. Popescu and his wife, Vlad

<sup>17</sup> TN The original document contains a grammatical error.

<sup>18</sup> ACNSAS, D 017257, source: Pius Leon, July 3 1970, f. 341

<sup>19</sup> ACNSAS, D 017257, Informative note dated 24.02.1966, source Denfai, f. 359 recto/verso

<sup>20</sup> F. Ichim, *op.cit.*, p. 112

<sup>21</sup> Information available at: <http://www.curierulnational.ro/print/39531>, last accessed on 24.4.2015

Mugur refused to return to Romania. In the file containing information on Vlad Mugur's investigation on grounds of espionage, his portrait is made up of informative notes and surveillance reports, which were carried out particularly after 1972 as he began his collaboration with Radio Free Europe. It is difficult to tell whether the facts in the file are actually true, since certain aspects of the personal life of Vlad Mugur are pettily manipulated and filled with insulting descriptions. A histrionic personality such as that of Vlad Mugur, highly contrasted with the Manichean perspective of the Securitate: he was extremely superstitious, as he himself admits in the interview with Florica Ichim, and many events in his life bear a novelistic feel, as if inspired Tolstoy's journal. Processed from the biased perspective of his pursuers, the often malicious information gathered from many sources, was passed on almost identically from one note to another. The common thread of the documents seems to be finding an answer to the question: What determined Vlad Mugur to take this path? Nobody seemed to understand why, at the peak of his career, the director chose to live in exile.

'A subject with real potential for development' who 'was awarded the Medal For Labour Valour<sup>22</sup> for work contribution', Vlad Mugur received in the last three years political evidence which guaranteed him a place in the forefront of art world<sup>23</sup>. He had been given the title of the best director for two years in a row<sup>24</sup> and had been awarded the Order of Lenin<sup>25</sup> during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Theatre in Cluj. At the beginning of the 70s, as Romania had barely achieved a reputation in the West, figures such as Vlad Mugur could only be beneficial for the country's image, proving the existence of creative freedom and creative force connected to the contemporary directions of the art world. When later asked about the reasons behind his decision, Vlad Mugur invoked a feeling that 'a dark period for the arts was

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<sup>22</sup> ACNSAS, D 19735, microfilm, f. 1, recto/verso

<sup>23</sup> 'Mrs. Minister was expecting me, she welcomed me, then came the prologue: that at first my career like a beautiful book (...) She said, reluctantly: 'Wouldn't you want to be leading director at the National Theatre in Cluj? «No», I said. She went to a safe, got some Money out, handed it to me, saying: 'The Ministry grant you the money to travel to Cluj and see some plays and see if you like them or not. That was 2500, a lot for those times (1964). I got it. Silvia Popovici, former student of mine, actress and friend, got married to Maxim Berghianu, who was appointed First Secretary for the Cluj region. So it was they who requested me.' remembers Vlad Mugur about his appointment. Florica Ichim, *op.cit.*, p. 91

<sup>24</sup> Vlad Mugur was awarded in 1970 the prize for best director, for *Un vis din noaptea miezului de vară* (A Midsummer's Night Dream) and *Trei surori* (*Three Sisters*), and Magda Stief one of the prizes for best actress for her portrayal of Irina in *Trei surori* by A.P. Cehov, productions performed at the National Theatre in Cluj.

<sup>25</sup> F. Ichim, *op.cit.*, p. 117

ahead', a perception that stemmed following an unexpected ideological meeting that took place in Bucharest in July 1971 and in which Ceaușescu established the Theses<sup>26</sup>.

The Securitate tried to speculate the existence of financial difficulties that the couple (Mugur-Stief) had while in Italy, based on accounts of various intermediaries or agents in charge of assessing the situation; Magda Stief explains why collaboration opportunities for the multi award winning runaway suddenly disappeared. He (Vlad Mugur AN) hoped that following the success of those tours, he would be able to work in Italy. But there also the power was in the hands of the communists. 'No, you cannot work here, they said'. In other words, coherent ideological comradeship between the two countries, particularly visible when it came to performing arts and cinema, could not be sacrificed in the name of Vlad Mugur. At a professional level, *leaving the country* equalled a final and irrevocable sentence. Magda Stief, a young actress at the height of her career, confesses that she was prepared to not ever be able to perform abroad, on stage, in a language other than Romanian or Hungarian. According to her, the fear of being *completely unknown* abroad and the permanent need for recognition deeply rooted in an actor's mind, has led many to accept the internal situation and reject the idea of exile<sup>27</sup>.

An informative note of 1972 reads: 'During the recent trip to France and Sweden I've had the opportunity to meet Vlad Mugur twice. After talking to him more I learned the following: (...) He started having financial difficulties. He also told me, in a burst of honesty, that Magda Stief ended up working as a cleaning lady<sup>28</sup>, while he was selling books on the street. In addition to this, they had some problems with the Italian authorities. He was denied a visa extension. Noel Bernard, at Radio Free Europe, took advantage of this. He wrote Vlad Mugur a letter suggesting that he come to West Germany. Once there he would be provided with a visa granting him the right to stay and a job at the radio station. Vlad Mugur gave in and, reluctantly, moved to Munich where he started his collaboration with the above-mentioned radio station. Now he is trying to find a job as an actor and says that as soon as he does so, he'll quit his collaboration'<sup>29</sup>.

Indeed, his collaboration with Radio Free Europe was occasional and short-lived as he managed to get past the temporary job that he didn't find very appealing and collaborate

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<sup>26</sup> At midnight, the intellectuals in Cluj and Transylvania were urgently made to get on a special train, and taken to the capital to meet with the General Secretary of The Romanian Communist Party and the leaders of what later became The Council for Socialist Culture and Education.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with Magda Stief, dated 12.03.2015, Cluj-Napoca

<sup>28</sup> TN Word misspelled in the original document

<sup>29</sup> ACNSAS, D 19735, Note 83/3111/SD of August 9 1972, f. 5

instead with several theatres in Munich and other German cities. The Securitate, however, took credit for his detachment from the militant environment of the radio station. Soon enough the secret police will come to the conclusion that Vlad Mugur did not ‘deal with the secret collection of information (espionage)’ and was especially interested in making an artistic career for himself in West Germany, from scratch. In 1976, one of the secret police services mentioned in an information note that Mugur ‘was of no interest’ and asked that his name was removed from the file<sup>30</sup>.

A handwritten, undated and unsigned table, probably drafted around the time when the tour to Germany in 1981 took place, numbers a total of 15 people from Cluj-Napoca that currently reside in West Germany ‘who could contact members of the National Theatre in Cluj that are travelling abroad’<sup>31</sup>. On top of the list we find Vlad Mugur, former director, followed by actors Oltica Munteanu, , Wili Schuleri, Alexandru Munte, Geta Popovici (Gitta AN) Simberger Alex, Schneider Alex, Dan Nuțu news presenter at Radio Free Europe, BBC news presenter Harry Baranga, Tribuna editor Emil Bunea, Ladiu Mircea, former instrumentalist for the Romanian Opera, conductor Erich Berger and Pisou Ioan, instrumentalist for the State Philharmonic.

To conclude, it is legitimate to ask ourselves why artists emigrated from communist Romania. Without having to provide a universally valid answer, we believe that the issues related to the mediocre way of life weighed more than anti-communist principles often invoked after the Revolution. And if take into account the whole number of intellectuals, we realize there are fewer cases of emigrants who fled invoking political reasons (Paul Goma, Dorin Tudoran). Personal reasons and the opportunity for a better life, free of the constraints of a communist society that was becoming increasingly rigid during the 70s, employment prospects encountered during previous voyages and the existence of networks of emigrants established by the Diaspora in Paris and Munich, have increased the number of artists who chose exile after 1971. The increasingly precarious economical context, the country's disastrous state determined by the internal recession of 1973 and the international recession of 1980 forced the authorities, regardless of its totalitarian nature, to reconsider the status – hitherto privileged – of the humanist intellectuals in society.

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