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The image of a Soviet woman-politician in the Belarusian magazine „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” (1946–1991)

Abstract

In the Soviet state the solving of the gender question was based on the Marxist-Leninist idea of men and women equality. The activities aimed to involve women in the political life were carried out together with the realization of the economic and social tasks. In the second half of the 1940s the problem of the emancipation of women in the USSR was recognized as resolved. The women participation in politics became the widespread phenomenon. The image of a woman-politician formed in mass media indicates that the soviet authorities were interested in the participation of women of all soviet republics in politics.

Analysis of the materials of the Belarusian popular women's magazine „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” in 1946–1991 allows to reconstruct the image of the women-politician of the BSSR as it was seen by the communist party ideologists and state functionaries. The image created in the process of mediation was not a neutral reflection of real Belarusian women – it was a part of an ideological order. Like all the Soviet media the magazine was a part of the means of propaganda of the Communist party that’s why it created the ideal images of the woman-politician and translated them to the reader.

Keywords: Soviet woman-politician, image of a politician, gender stereotypes, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka”, magazine, BSSR

**Wizerunek sowieckiej kobiety-polityka w białoruskim czasopiśmie
«Rabotnica i sialanka» [„Robotnica i Chłopka”] (1946–1991)**

Streszczenie

Rozwiązanie problemu płci w ZSRR opierało się na marksistowsko-leninowskiej interpretacji idei równości kobiet i mężczyzn. Działania mające na celu zaangażowanie kobiet w życie polityczne realizowane były jednocześnie z realizacją zadań gospodarczych i społecznych. W drugiej połowie lat 40. problem emancypacji kobiet w ZSRR został uznany za rozwiązany. Udział kobiet w polityce stał zjawiskiem powszechnym. Państwo było zainteresowane udziałem kobiet republik radzieckich w procesach politycznych, o czym świadczy sformowany w mediach wizerunek sowieckiej kobiety-polityka.

Analiza materiałów popularnego białoruskiego magazynu kobiecego „Robotnica i Chłopka” za lata 1946–1991 pozwala zrekonstruować wizerunek kobiety-polityka BSSR tak jak go rozumeli ideolodzy i funkcjonariusze partyjni i państwowe. Powstały na łamach pisma wizerunek był nie neutralnym odzwierciedleniem zwykłych kobiet białoruskich, a częścią ideologicznego zamówienia. Czasopismo, podobnie jak wszystkie media radzieckie, występowało najpierw jako środek propagandy partii komunistycznej. Pismo tworzyło idealne wizerunki kobiety-polityka, jakie przekazywało czytelnikom.

Słowa kluczowe: sowiecka kobieta-polityk, obraz polityka, stereotypy płci, „Robotnica i Chłopka”, czasopismo, BSRR

On December 30, 1922 at the first All-Union Congress of Soviets there was an agreement approved for the establishment of the Soviet Union. The leaders of the new state proclaimed a course for the construction of socialism in a particular country. A large-scale project was developed in order to implement this task. It aimed at raising a „new man” who would become a core of the Soviet society.

The project was also put in place to solve a gender inequality issue. In the first decades of the USSR existence there were systematically held activities aimed at women’s involvement in social production, as well as in the field of public administration. The USSR Constitution of 1936 guaranteed women's civil and political rights including active and passive

suffrage¹. As a result, by the end of the 1930s the women's issue began to disappear from the state-party bodies' agenda. The women emancipation task in the USSR was completed.

The Soviet leaders were forced to adjust their attitude toward woman in the country as a result of large human losses during the Second World War, as well as a need to restore the economy. The 9th Plenum of the Central Committee of the CP(b)B (27 June – 1 July 1946) adopted a resolution on the strengthening of the ideological and political work among women. „Tremendous tasks for rebuilding and further development of the national economy and culture” after the Second World War could not be implemented without women's involvement in political and public life². The division of propaganda of the Central Committee of the CP(b)B was instructed to resume publication³ of the magazine „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” in order to fulfill the task⁴.

The journal, intended for a female audience, published materials of various subjects and genres. A large number of publications were dedicated to women-deputies of Local Councils, the BSSR and USSR Supreme Councils, women participating in delegate meetings, party organizations, etc. The analysis of these publications allows one to understand how the magazine at the same time formed and broadcast to its readers the ideas about women in the state authorities.

Articles of 1940–50s, dedicated to women-politicians, were similar in structure and the way the data was presented. A narration normally began with a detailed biography of a woman, her difficult life. She was an ordinary slogger, „a simple countrywoman” who could not even dream of participating in governing the State⁵.

The Soviet leaders paid special attention to western areas that joined the BSSR in 1939. The acquisition of these lands was not easy. The 8th

¹ *Zakonodatel'stvo o pravakh zhenshchin v SSSR. Sbornik normativnykh aktov*, Moskva: Yuridicheskaya literatura, 1975, p. 13-14.

² The National Archives of The Republic of Belarus [Natsional'nyy Arkhiv Respubliki Belarus', NARB], f. 4п., op. 20, d. 225, l. 32.

³ The magazine was founded in 1924 under the name „Byelaruskaya rabotnitsa i syalyanka”. During The Second World War the publication of the magazine was suspended.

⁴ NARB, f. 4п., op. 20, d. 225, l. 33.

⁵ M. Ihnatsyuk, *Radasny, khvalyuchy dzyen'*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1946, nr 1, p. 5.

Plenum of the Central Committee of the CP(b)B (December 1945) pointed to insufficient work carried out in order to strengthen the Soviet power in those territories. In accordance with a Plenum decision, the party bodies were requested to strengthen their work among certain categories of citizens, namely women⁶. It was to promote the BSSR western area women's engagement in public and political life of the country, as well as the elimination of their „political and cultural ignorance”⁷.

As a result, the magazine during the 1940–50s was dominated by articles about women-politicians previously lived in the Poland territory. They emotionally recalled their life in Poland where „women were not treated as humans”, „a woman was a slave” who suffered humiliation even from her husband, or from the „sir-owner” she was working for⁸. They perceived joining the BSSR with joy⁹. Only after uniting „into a single fraternal family with working people of the BSSR” women obtained „free happy life”, received equal rights with men, and were able to actively participate in the country activities¹⁰. For this drastic turn of their destiny, women were grateful to their countrymen, the Soviet power and „The Great Stalin” who gave them an opportunity to see a different life and become successful¹¹.

Every article introduced biographies of working women who took part in the country authorities. As a rule, they were the best toilers of the kolkhoz (collective farms) and factories that had mastered their profession immediately at the enterprise, conscientiously carried out their duties, took on additional commitments to improve productivity and the quality of products¹². The editorial board assured that material possessions had no

⁶ NARB, f. 4п., op. 20, d. 222, l. 11.

⁷ A. Korzun, *Shyrey razhornyem rabotu syarod zhanchyn zakhodnikh ablatsyey BSSR*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1946, nr 1, p. 15.

⁸ M. Ihnatsyuk, *Radasny...*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁹ For example, M. Ihnatsyuk, *Radasny...*, op. cit., p. 5; *Pad stsyaham Lyenina, pad vadzitsyel'stvam Stalina – upyerad da pyeramohi komunizma*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1949, nr 1, p. 14; N Anyukow, *Znatnaya traktarystka*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1951, nr 2, p. 9-10.

¹⁰ M. Ihnatsyuk, *Radasny...*, op. cit., p. 5.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² For example, *Deputat – sluha naroda*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1946, nr 3, p. 18; N. Anyukow, op. cit., p. 9-10; A. Vasilyevich, *Zvychaynaya biyahrafiya*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1954, nr 3, p. 6-7.

value to women-politicians. They were willing to work excessively for the prosperity of the socialist motherland¹³.

As a rule, women-politicians of 1940–50s had no education and felt embarrassed by this fact. This however, was not considered a problem for their colleagues, fellow villagers and voters. They had a confidence in the ability of women to solve the problems of the country¹⁴. This confidence was based on the fact that the entire life of women participating in political processes was based on hard work. Besides, women-politicians didn't rest on their laurels and educated themselves. The literature that raised their knowledge level included the works of V. Lenin, Stalin, and also a short course on the Communist Party history¹⁵.

There was almost no information about the personal lives of women-politicians in the articles of the 1940s. There was only fragmentary information about their families. As a rule, they reported that a woman was a heroine mother, or a widow whose husband had died during the war, a desperate mother who had lost her children in the time of the war¹⁶. Also highlighted were the burdens of a woman's life. That allowed for a reader to learn that a member of the Council of Workers' Deputies F. Struy had lost both legs during the war years, yet „regardless of her strength and health Fekla Fyodorovna honestly served her people”¹⁷.

Women considered the deputy status as a great responsibility, and were afraid of losing the people's trust. This sense of responsibility was shared among other workers of kolkhoz (collective farms) and enterprises where women worked¹⁸.

The editorial board urged the readers that their trust was not in vain. This was evidenced in the articles' titles: „The deputy is a servant of the

¹³ For example, *Poshta deputata*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1948, nr 7, p. 22-23; Y. Tarasaw, *Tsyaplo, addadzyenaye lyudzyam*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1961, nr 10, p. 2-4.

¹⁴ For example, *Shlyakh syalyanki*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1949, nr 10, p. 7; A. Vasilyevich, op. cit., p. 7; N. Syarhyeyeva, *Slava pratsawnitsy*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1955, nr 1, p. 4; I. Kaval'chuk, *Kali lyubish spravu*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1956, nr 2, p. 4.

¹⁵ I. Hramovich, *Kamunistka lyeninskaha pryzyvu*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1948, nr 1, p. 16; *Poshta deputata*, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁶ For example, M. Mikhaylova, *Za shchastsye naroda*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1946, nr 7, p. 7; *Shlyakh syalyanki*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁷ M. Mikhaylova, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁸ For example, *Deputat – sluha...*, op. cit., p. 18.

people!”¹⁹, „The deputy at work”²⁰, „To the people’s happiness”²¹, „At voters”²², etc. It was clear from the articles’ content that the entire day of women-politicians was busy with fruitful work for the benefit of the country. The voters always had an opportunity to directly refer to them for help. Women-politicians contributed to solving a wide range of problems. They aided in the restoration of lost documents, opening medical institutions, working on new school projects, as well as assisting families of the soldiers who had died during the war, etc²³. However, it should be taken into consideration that the conditions of the Soviet state excluded citizens from making political decisions. Therefore, women’s participation in politics was symbolic. They could only facilitate social problem solving. Their main task was to promote a connection between the state bodies and the broad masses and mobilizing workers to execute decisions of the state-party bodies.

As members of the Communist Party, women-politicians worked actively among the broad masses and primarily among the female population, fostering women to be patriotic and dedicated to the communist party²⁴.

A woman-politician was portrayed as a true friend of the women in the country. She was characterized by extraordinary humanitarianism, and a willingness to listen carefully. She was asked for advice not only in the professional sphere, but personal as well. She perceived others’ happiness as her own²⁵.

Active employment of the female population in a production industry in the first post-war decade in conjunction with a poorly developed social infrastructure led to an excessive workload of the Soviet women, obstructed implementation of family and household responsibilities. By the early 1960s,

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ *Deputat za rabotay*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1946, nr 4-5, p. 13.

²¹ M. Mikhaylova, op. cit., p. 13.

²² N. Kazantsava, *U vybarshchikaw*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1947, nr 2, p. 4.

²³ M. Mikhaylova, op. cit., p.7; I. Hramovich, op. cit., p. 16; A. Laznyavy, *Prakof'yewna*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1958, nr 1, p. 14-15; V. Lyasny, *Daroha w syel'ski sawyet*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1966, nr 8, p. 4-5; A. Zakharenka, *Davyer'ye*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1979, nr 2, p. 1-2.

²⁴ *Vykhavannye zhanochaha aktjiva*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1947, nr 8, p. 13.

²⁵ For example, *Shlyakh syalyanki*, op. cit., p. 7; M. Yastrabaw, *Zayzdrosny lyos*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1959, nr 3, p. 5.

this became one of the reasons (along with the industrialization, urbanization, changes in the social structure of the population, increased priority in education) for the decline in birth rate in the country. In an attempt to overcome these negative trends there was a reform put into action targeting labor, family and social legislation sectors which had started during the presidency of N.S. Khrushchev, and then continued through L.I. Brezhnev. The laws about mixed (boys and girls) education (1954), the legalization of abortion (1955), the simplification of a divorce procedure (1965), „Fundamentals of Legislation of the USSR and Union Republics on marriage and family” (1968), and the USSR Constitution in 1977 were aimed at ensuring the Soviet Woman would have all the necessary social and living conditions in order to be able to combine „a happy motherhood with a more active and creative participation in the production and socio-political life”²⁶. In other words, preserving the principle of men and women equality, the Soviet leaders were consistently forming the legislation that would alleviate the plight of a working woman, and help her to combine motherhood with active social and work activities.

The social legislation change in 1950–70s led to a transformation of the perceptions of an ideal of „the Soviet woman”. Consequently, the image of a woman participating in the political life underwent changes.

Around the mid-1950s, changes in a woman-politician image representation started being traced in „Rabotnica i syalyanka”. On one hand, a worker biography was still illustrated in the magazine. However, a description of women-politicians’ past became less detailed. Instead, it started being replaced with the stories of women’s labor routine in kolkhoz (collective farms) and enterprises. The magazine described in detail a volume of harvested crop, milk yields, livestock, manufactured goods, and so on. The magazine emphasized women’s efforts that contributed to the rise of the farm where they worked up to the level of being one of the best in the country²⁷.

²⁶ *Zakonodatel'stvo o pravakh ...*, op. cit., p. 36.

²⁷ For example, N. Syarhyeyeva, *Slava...*, op. cit., p. 4-5; I. Kaval'chuk, op. cit., p. 4; Ye Shcherba, *Pratsownay darohay*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1958, nr 2, p. 2–3; A. Poznyak, *Shlyakh da podviha*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1960, nr 5, p. 5.

On the other hand, in the middle of the 1950s, personal lives of women-politicians became more public. Information about their families became more detailed. A reader could see a maternal care of children, pride for their achievements, and concerns about problems they could have²⁸. Women-politicians were no longer portrayed only as the best workers, but also as caring, loving and good mothers, grandmothers, wives, and people with versatile hobbies. For example, in the article of 1969, describing the Secretary of Polotsk City Committee of CPSU Elena Prokofyeva, a correspondent made a remark that she wasn't „frumpy”. She was rather a very cheerful person in the company, she sang and danced well²⁹.

1960s depicted laconic characteristics of the appearances of women-politicians. The first descriptions didn't have an aesthetic nature. E.i., the deputy of the Supreme Council of the BSSR Lyubov Ukhina was shown as a thin, slender, always friendly Belarusian³⁰. In 1970s, descriptions of the appearances were becoming more detailed. Women-politicians were described as beautiful, well-groomed, and fashionably dressed ladies³¹.

Gradual feminization of the education in the USSR started gradually happening since the mid-1960s. The educational level of women exceeded this indicator among the male population³². Thus, in 1960s women-politicians were presented on the pages of the magazine as being better educated than their predecessors. Even if they mastered the profession at an enterprise or in a kolkhoz (a collective farm), they further tried to get a diploma³³. Women-politicians of 1970–80s often had higher education, even

²⁸ N. Syarhyeyeva, *Slava...*, op. cit., p. 4-5; N. Syarhyeyeva, *Haspadary*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1957, nr 2, p. 4-5; A. Zakharenka, *Malodshaya dachka*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1961, nr 7, p. 2-3; R. Samusyenkava, *Chlyen urada*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1966, nr 4, p. 6-7; A. Stukala, *Taki kharaktar*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1976, nr 7, p. 4-5.

²⁹ T. Mukha, *Sakratar harkoma*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1969, nr 11, p. 13.

³⁰ I. Smirnova, *Dlya lyudzyey*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1962, nr 5, p. 4.

³¹ For example, A. Uladzimirava, *Pryjomny dzyen' ministra*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1970, nr 8, p. 9; M. Karpyenka, *Nashy deputaty*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1975, nr 7, p. 8; V. Karalyova, *Pryhazhosts'*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1977, nr 2, p. 6.

³² I. Lavrinovskaya, *Transformatsiya obshchestvennogo statusa i rolevykh funktsiy sel'skoy zhenshchiny v Belarusi vo vtoroy polovine XX – nachale XXI veka*, „Pytanni mastatstvaznavstva, etnalohii i fal'klarystyki” 2006, vypusk 9, s. 307.

³³ For example, *Z lyubowyu w sertsy*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1962, nr 4, p. 5.

academic degrees. In general, they were not only a working class or peasants, but representatives of the intelligence³⁴.

The period of perestroika (reconstruction period in the USSR) was characterized by two trends. A course to democratization of the country required a participation of all social layers in a political life. This resulted in an activation of a women's movement and the revival of the women's councils as assistants to the party aiming at recruiting women to a public and political life, solving the industrial and social issues³⁵. At the same time, the liberalization of the Soviet regime foregrounded a question about a woman's role and place in the country, the essence of family and marriage relations, and issues of gender equality.

Discussions on the role of a woman in the society directly influenced the image of a woman-politician. The magazine „Rabotnica i syalyanka” became a ground for polemic with two opposite positions. The authors in a number of publications invoked women to remember their natural mission, return to a private sphere of being a wife and a housewife. This position was clearly formulated by a Belarusian writer Lydia Arabey in her article „We who give a life”. Reviewing the social functions of a woman, the author concluded that the most important responsibilities were those of a mother, a housewife, and a wife. If there was any woman who combined these functions with a governing position someone would have to help her with the home and children, or „she lives and works, as they say, to the point of exhaustion”³⁶.

The other position was expressed by women-politicians themselves. On one hand, they emphasized a predominant place of a family in their life, and remarked that their success as professionals was largely dependent on the support of their loved ones³⁷. Women were not afraid to look weak and acknowledged that it was difficult to reconcile professional and household

³⁴ A. Uladzimirava, *Zyalyonaya lyampa*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1984, nr 5, p. 4-5; *U nashym domye svyata vyedaw*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1984, nr 9, p. 2-3; *Vysoki lyos, vysoki abavyazak*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1987, nr 1, p. 2-3; *Pramaya suvyaz'*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1987, nr 11, p. 1-4.

³⁵ *Udzyel'nitsam Usyesayuznay kanfyerentsyi zhanchyn*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1987, nr 3, p. 1.

³⁶ L. Arabey, *My, khto daye zhytstsyo*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1987, nr 7, p. 1.

³⁷ For example, *Svyatsilasya akno*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1984, nr 2, p. 3.

responsibilities. They believed that the state should remove a burden of household concerns from women and put it on the scope of services³⁸. Despite the heavy duties women-politicians did not forget about their appearances and did their best to look attractive, feminine, well groomed and well dressed³⁹. On the other hand, women-politicians tried to convince readers that the work was more of a personal satisfaction for them, a need to escape from a monotonous life of housewives. The work was important from a self-realization point of view. Therefore, the image of an active public figure and the best worker in the years of reconstruction didn't lose its relevance⁴⁰.

Another interesting way of forming the image of women-politicians was through photos. The magazines of the 1940s published the portraits of ordinary women workers. In the 1950–1960s the photos were primarily taken at the farms, fields, factories, etc. At that time, the majority of photos illustrated women in their working clothes. In 1964, for the first time the journal posted a photo of the Supreme Council deputy of the BSSR Alexandra Fedosyuk with her two small grandchildren. The photo note drew attention: „The main weakness of Alexandra Ivanovna is her grandchildren”⁴¹. Since that time, the magazine regularly published photos of women with their family⁴². While in the first post-war years women-politicians were visualized only as the toilers, starting from the 1960s, they were depicted as mothers, grandmothers, housewives.

In other words, the image of women in politics created on the pages of the magazine „Rabotnica i syalyanka” was deliberately determined by the state policy, was an integral part of the concept of „the new Soviet man” and, at the same time, was an influential tool to the society. When introducing women-politicians to the readers, the magazine demonstrated the ideal

³⁸ A. Uladzimirava, *I zastavatstva zhanchynay*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1987, nr 8, p. 4-5; *Pramaya svyaz*, op. cit., p. 2; *Bol'sh svyatla, bol'sh demakratyi*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1988, nr 6, p. 2.

³⁹ S. Kulinkovich, *Adzinaya pryvilyeya*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1987, nr 6, p. 7; A. Uladzimirava, *I zastavatstva...*, op. cit., p. 4; *Bol'sh svyatla...*, op. cit., p. 2.

⁴⁰ For example, A. Mikalaychanka, *Dzyen' yak dzyen'*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1987, nr 3, p. 4-5; S. Kulinkovich, op. cit., p. 6-7; *Bol'sh svyatla...*, op. cit., p. 2-4.

⁴¹ A. Uladzimirava, *Yaye zhytstsyo hartavalasya w polymi*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1964, nr 9, p. 3.

⁴² R. Samusyenkava, op. cit., p. 7; *Stynuts' tumany nad vozyeram*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1972, nr 11, p. 2; V. Karalyova, op. cit., p. 7; A. Ihnatsyuk, *Voknami w polye*, „Rabotnitsa i syalyanka” 1984, nr 10, p. 2.

patterns of behavior of the Soviet woman and Soviet man creating an illusion of Soviet citizens' participation in the governance of the state.

A woman of the first post-war decade was positioned as an important productive resource. The magazine created and broadcast the image of a public figure and the best toiler that due to her merits acquired a right to participate in governing the state. A public life and production were perceived as the main field of self-actualization of a woman-politician. In the totalitarian system conditions a personal life was subordinated to the state interests. Thus, the ambitions of a woman-politician were aimed at increasing the well-being of the country.

Modernization of the Soviet system and liberalization of some social and political life in the period of the Khrushchev's „thaw” partially „rehabilitated” a private human life. The Soviet legislation consolidated the equal rights and opportunities for men and women. Motherhood was recognized as a social function of women. However, the legal equality did not mean de facto equality between the genders. In fact, a woman-politician, like any other soviet woman, was deprived of the right to choose her functions. She had to carry a responsibility for her country, family and household. The production and demographic components were essential in the public policy of the USSR. Therefore, the editorial board efforts of the magazine focused on the formation and consolidation in the public consciousness the image of a „working mother”. This image existed in the soviet society up until the collapse of the USSR.

The collapse of socialist values in the period of perestroika (the period of reconstruction) led to a certain de-ideologization of the image of a woman-politician. The image of a woman politician emphasized her feminine qualities (a need for a strong family, a reliable husband, readiness to show her weaknesses, a desire to external attractiveness). At the same time, the importance of professional self-realization, and a need for participation in a political life and social processes was broadcast through the image of a woman-politician.

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