



Russian Forces in Ukraine

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The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent large-scale deployment of Russian troops near the Russo-Ukrainian border were popularly referred to in Russia as 'Operation Russian Spring'. While the annexation itself of Crimea was relatively peaceful, the actions of Russian and Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine turned into an increasingly fierce fight as the Ukrainian government launched its own 'anti-terrorist operation' against the Russian-supported rebels.

In this way, the comparatively bloodless Russian spring gave way to a Russian winter of fierce combat. The first operational successes of Ukrainian forces in late June and early July 2014 first prompted Russian artillery fire from within Russian territory, targeted against advancing Ukrainian troops on their own soil, from mid-July onwards. Direct intervention by Russian troops in combat roles then followed in the middle of August, when the prospect of rebel defeat had become realistic. The presence of large numbers of Russian troops on Ukrainian sovereign territory has, more or less, since become a permanent feature of the conflict.

The first phase of large-scale incursions by regular Russian troops commenced on 11 August 2014 and has involved a substantial array of forces (see Table 1). Elements of some Russian reconnaissance and special operations units have operated on Ukrainian soil since 14 July (at the latest), comprising teams generated by six units.

The Russian military operation against Ukraine is instructive, having been waged in accordance with the Gerasimov Doctrine of Ambiguous Warfare.¹

1. Presented by the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Army General Valeriy Gerasimov, in January 2013 at the Russian Academy of Military Sciences' annual meeting; key elements of the Gerasimov Doctrine have since been integrated into the new edition of the Russian Military Doctrine, as approved in December 2014.

Table 1: Russian Combat and Reconnaissance Formations during the August 2014 Incursion.

Battalion tactical groups (from 11 August) generated by:	17 th Motor-Rifle Brigade
	18 th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade
	21 st Motor-Rifle Brigade
	33 rd (Mountain) Motor-Rifle Brigade
	247 th Guards Air-Assault Regiment (7 th Guards Air-Assault Division)
	104 th Guards Air-Assault Regiment (76 th Guards Air-Assault Division)
	331 st Guards Airborne Regiment (98 th Guards Airborne Division)
	137 th Guards Airborne Regiment (106 th Guards Airborne Division)
	31 st Guards Air-Assault Brigade
	2 nd Spetsnaz Brigade
Reconnaissance teams (from 14 July) generated by:	2 nd Spetsnaz Brigade
	10 th Spetsnaz Brigade
	45 th Guards Spetsnaz Regiment of the Airborne Troops (VDV)
	173 rd Guards Separate Recce Company (106 th Guards Airborne Division)
	Recce battalion of the 9 th Motor-Rifle Brigades (the former 84 th Independent Reconnaissance Battalion)
	Recce battalion of the 18 th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade (the former 18 th Independent Reconnaissance Battalion)

But it has also revealed some of the constraints on Russia's exercise of military power; primarily, its limited capacity to sustain an operation of this size.

Indeed, it is obvious that there are insufficient resources – military and financial – under the Kremlin's command to sustain military operations at the current level for over a year: the military capabilities required to carry out the operation are already reaching their limits. It might be too early to definitively assess that Russia's military capacity is overstretched by the crisis in Ukraine, but some facts are evident. Twenty-eight military units were required to generate the approximately 90,000 troops stationed on the Russo–Ukrainian border and within Crimea in spring 2014.² These units were drawn from a relatively limited geographic area in this early phase of the operation against Ukraine. To sustain this deployment and the required intensity of fighting, it was necessary to call upon more units.

2. For additional details see: 'Ukraine Military Dispositions: The Military Ticks Up While the Clock Ticks Down', RUSI Briefing Paper, April 2014.

Table 2: Russian Regular Units with Troops Involved in Ukraine Combat Operations, February 2015.

Type	Units	
	Northern Operational Area	Southern Operational Area
Motorised infantry	2 nd Guards (Tamanskaya) Division (elements of) 8 th Guards Brigade 18 th Brigade 19 th Brigade 20 th Guards Brigade 23 rd Guards Brigade 27 th Guards Brigade 28 th Brigade 32 nd Brigade 33 rd (Mountain) Brigade 37 th Brigade	2 nd Guards (Tamanskaya) Division (elements of) 9 th Brigade 138 th Brigade
Airborne and air-assault	31 st Guards Air-Assault Brigade 104 th Guards Air-Assault Regiment (76 th Guards Air-Assault Division) 217 th Guards Airborne Regiment (98 th Guards Airborne Division) 137 th Guards Airborne Regiment (106 th Guards Airborne Division)	11 th Guards Air-Assault Brigade
Spetsnaz	10 th Brigade 346 th Brigades 25 th Regiment FSB Special Operations Centre (elements of)	45 th Guards Airborne Spetsnaz Regiment 561 st Naval Spetsnaz battalion 54 th Reconnaissance units Training Centre
Ministry of Interior	Dzerzhinskiy Division (elements of) 107 th Operational Brigade Chechen Mol combined battalion	Dzerzhinskiy Division (elements of)
Armoured	5 th Guards Brigade 6 th Brigade 13 th Guards Regiment (4 th Guards [Kantemirovskaya] Division)	12 th Guards Regiment (4 th Guards [Kantemirovskaya] Division)
Rocket and artillery	1 st Guards Missile Brigade 79 th Guards Brigade 232 nd MRL Brigade 288 th Artillery Brigade 291 st Artillery Brigade 385 th Artillery Brigade 1065 th Guards Artillery Regiment (98 th Guards Airborne Division) 573 rd Separate Artillery Reconnaissance Battalion 67 th Air Defence Brigade	200 th Artillery Brigade 268 th Guards Artillery Brigade 1140 th Guards Artillery Regiment (76 th Guards Air-Assault Division)
Combat Support/ Combat Service Support	74 th SIGINT Regiment 78 th Materiel Support Brigade 7015 th Armaments Maintenance Base 7016 th Armaments Maintenance Base 282 nd Armaments Repair Base 29 th Railway Brigade	59 th Communications Brigade 95 th Communications Brigades 31 st Engineer Regiment

Note: The Northern operational area comprises Debaltseve, Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as the central area of rebel-controlled territory in the east of Ukraine. The Southern operational area includes Russian and rebel forces deployed near Mariupol.

Russian Forces in Ukraine

Following their increasingly large-scale, direct and conventional involvement in combat against Ukrainian troops in the middle of August 2014,³ Russian troops in Ukraine numbered between 3,500 and 6,000–6,500 by the end of August 2014, according to different sources.⁴ That number fluctuated, reaching approximately 10,000 at the peak of direct Russian involvement in the middle of December 2014. The Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) had to involve 117 combat and combat-support units to generate the approximately 42,000 troops rotating in the vicinity of the Russo–Ukrainian border: either stationed there, delivering artillery fire against Ukrainian territory from Russian soil, or directly participating in combat operations on Ukrainian sovereign territory. It is noteworthy that 104 of these 117 units have been involved in *combat* since autumn 2014 in either one of the two above mentioned forms – 3.5 times more than the number of military units involved in Crimea and in southeastern Ukraine over spring and summer 2014.

The overall figure of Russian troops operating in eastern Ukraine reached approximately 9,000 by the last week of February 2015 and has increased by at least 1,500–2,000 personnel since then.⁵ Russian troops stationed in Crimea should be also kept in mind – they might conservatively be estimated to number 26,000–28,000 now, including approximately 13,000 of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (other estimates of the overall number of Russian troops in Crimea range between 29,000 and 40,000).

It is also worth noting that all but two of Russia's ten field armies – the 35th and 5th Red Banner – contributed troops for the summer-autumn phase of the Ukrainian operation (military units from Ussuriysk and Vladivostok came from the Eastern Military District, not from the 5th Red Banner field army; see Figure 1). Military units from as far as Vladivostok and the Kuril Islands have been identified participating in the Ukraine operation. Furthermore, seven out of ten Russian field armies (namely, the 2nd Guards, 6th, 20th, 49th, 41st, 36th and 29th Field Armies) have had or still have all manoeuvre units within their commands mobilised in order to generate sufficient troops for the summer/autumn and winter stages of the Ukraine operation. The 58th Field

3. Spetsnaz teams and reconnaissance parties operated on the Ukrainian soil much earlier, the 45th Separate Guards Special Operations (reconnaissance) regiment of the Russian Airborne Troops was involved into the separatists' attempt to capture Donetsk airport in May 2014.
4. Sergiy Leschenko, 'Ukraina: mizh vyboramy ta voennym stanom' ['Ukraine: between Elections and a State of War], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 5 September 2014; author interview with a senior officer of the Operations Directorate, Ukrainian General Staff, 9 February 2015.
5. The US military estimates around 12,000 Russian soldiers to be supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine, according to the US Army's Commander in Europe, General Ben Hodges. He estimates the amount of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border and in Crimea as 50,000 and 29,000, respectively. *Reuters*, 'Some 12,000 Russian Soldiers in Ukraine Supporting Rebels: U.S. Commander', 3 March 2015.

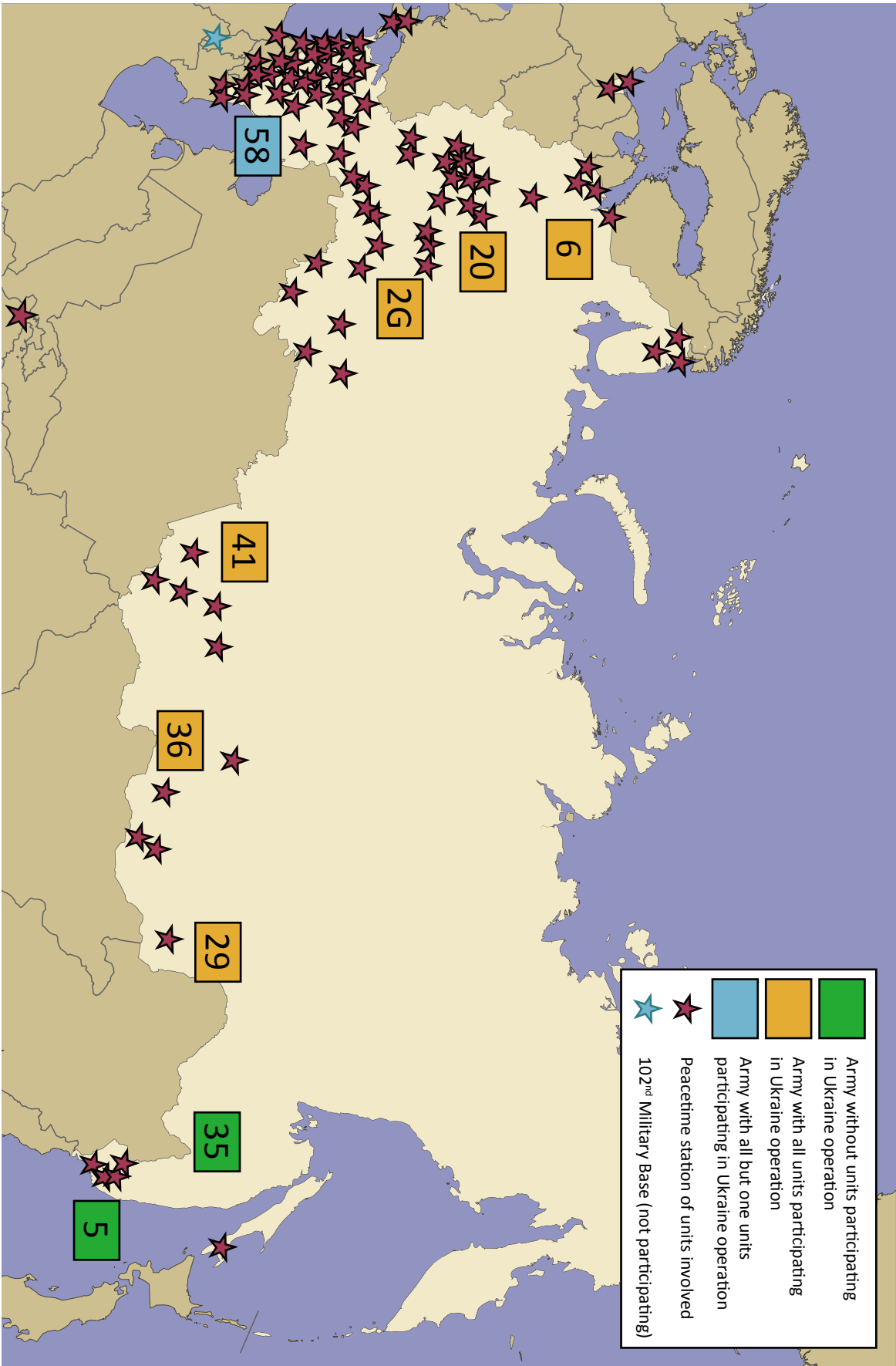


Figure 1: Russian Units Participating in Operations in Ukraine, February 2015.

Army mobilised all but one of its manoeuvre units, which is stationed abroad without direct access to Russian territory (namely, the 102nd Military Base in Armenia; this is marked by a light-blue star in Figure 1). It is illustrative that the 102nd Military Base is the Russian beachhead in Armenia, which has been involved in a conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh area since late 1989; the conflict has shown signs of heating up in recent months. The other Russian military base without direct access to Russian territory – the 201st in Tajikistan – was reported to be sending troops to the Russo–Ukrainian border in late January 2015.

The Russian MoD kept sending reinforcements to the east of Ukraine even after the ceasefire was signed in Minsk on 13 February. Indeed, two days later detachments of the 2nd Guards were detected in combat near Mariupol, where they arrived as a fresh reserve to replace the 138th Motor-Rifle Brigade, which had suffered serious manpower losses over a three-week period.

Force Sustainment

With the ‘regime of silence’ (an informally agreed ceasefire) introduced in the east of Ukraine in early December 2014, Russian troops were moved to the rear, behind rebel formations, carrying out combat-service support (for instance, logistical supply) and combat support (long-range artillery fire) functions. This served the Kremlin’s political aim to avoid disrupting the then-forthcoming Minsk negotiations that were scheduled for 11 February, with which the Kremlin planned to achieve a political framework for re-introducing rebel territories back into Ukraine. (There were voices in Ukraine calling for acceptance of the occupation of Donbass in order to prevent it from being used as a Trojan horse within the Ukrainian political system.)

At the same time, casualties have forced the Russian command, instead of using Battalion Tactical Groups originating from a single brigade or division, to establish ad hoc formations that combine detachments from different units into combined tactical groups. Those two facts combined prompted some observers to suggest there are no Russian regular units fighting as coherent formations in the combat zone – with only individual ‘volunteer’ servicemen fighting and the organised regular Russian military present in exclusively command roles and as specialist crews to operate the most sophisticated

equipment.⁶ However, with a new round of fighting starting immediately after the ceasefire was signed, Russian units returned to prioritised forward locations, as the most capable strike force; rebel formations have in essence been used as cannon fodder. During the February fighting on the northern front, combined formations of Russian regulars have been detected on a number of occasions:

- On 1–2 February, a combined formation – consisting of the 8th Guards and 18th Guards Motor-Rifle brigades, 25th Spetsnaz Regiment, and elements of the 232nd MRL brigade – was involved in combat near Debaltsevo
- At the same time, the 8th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade deployed some of its personnel within a combined formation – of the 8th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade and 5th Tank Brigade – to serve as infantry support to armoured forces near Gorlovka
- A combined formation of the 27th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade and 217th Guards Airborne Regiment (98th Guards Airborne Division) moved to Logvinovo on 14 February when the combined formation of 136th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade and 25th Spetsnaz Regiment fighting there to close the corridor to Debaltsevo had to be withdrawn after severe manpower losses. (The combined formation of the 27th Guards and 217th Guards Airborne was itself established around the core of the latter's Battalion Tactical Group after it took heavy losses.)
- The 20th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade's tactical group had to be reformed into a combined formation with 18th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade elements after 13 February; the 20th Guards elements were a substitute for the elements of the 8th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade due to the latter's substantial losses
- Other combined formations – of 19th Motor-Rifle Brigade with 10th Spetsnaz Brigade; of the 13th Guards Tank Regiment (4th Guards [Kantemirovskaya] Tank Division) with the 32nd Motor-Rifle brigade;

6. See, for example, remarks by the US ambassador to NATO on 4 February 2015 that Russian troops were present in eastern Ukraine, but only in a command role and to operate advanced equipment, and that a large-scale intervention did not appear imminent. *Reuters*, 'Russians Present in Ukraine in Specialist Roles: U.S. Envoy', 4 February 2015. The *Daily Mail* further detailed the ambassador's statement at a briefing before a meeting of NATO defence ministers: "'Back in August, we saw a spike in direct Russian intervention in the form of Russian military units. We saw Russian battalions as coherent formations deployed into Ukraine," Lute told a news briefing before a NATO defence ministers' meeting on Thursday. "We don't see another such direct intervention [by Russian units] as imminent," he said.' *Daily Mail*, 'Russians Present in Ukraine in Specialist Roles: U.S. Envoy', 4 February 2014.

and of the 104th Guards Air-Assault Regiment (76th Guards Air-Assault Division) with the 'Kalmius' rebel formation – were also detected in combat in the Northern Operational Area in February

- The 9th Motor-Rifle Brigade operated in a combined formation with elements of an unidentified unit in the Southern Operational Area.

The wide geographic dispersion of the units involved in generating troops for the operation could be considered to reflect the typical desire of military planners to give troops experience in a combat environment whenever such an opportunity arises. But this is not the primary case for the current situation; there are indications of other reasons.

The units permanently located in the Russian MoD's Southern and Western military districts generated the Battalion Tactical Groups for the spring phase of the operation, yet they were only able to supply Company Tactical Groups in the autumn and especially the winter periods. Some units struggled to meet even those lower requirements. For instance, the 536th Coastal Artillery Brigade had to temporarily assign some of its professional servicemen to serve in the 61st Marine Brigade to allow the latter to generate a tactical group to be sent to Ukraine.

At the same time, Siberian units have been ordered to generate much more than Battalion Tactical Groups; the 36th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade's contribution was of nearly regimental size, with tank, motorised-infantry and artillery battalions, plus additional, smaller combat-support and combat service-support detachments. This appears to indicate a shortage of badly needed manpower, while the fact that the Siberian units have been transported into the Ukrainian area of operations with their own organic assets – instead of just ferrying their personnel into the area – implies a shortage of military hardware in theatre. Taken together, it suggests that enabling troops to train in realistic combat environments is certainly not the only reason for the participation of such remotely located units.

Furthermore, generating new 'professionals' out of unwitting conscripts is another key indicator that a lack of personnel – and not the combat-training benefits – is the real cause for the involvement of distantly located units. There are reports of Russian military personnel being intimidated into 'volunteering' for covert combat in eastern Ukraine. On several occasions, conscripts have been fraudulently 'converted' into professional status to do so, sometimes being recorded as apparently having expressed a desire to become professionals; on at least one occasion it was reported that the unit's commander forged contracts, signing them himself for unaware conscripts. It is hardly necessary to describe how such activities may be harmful to troop morale.

A further example of such actions is the deployment of the Russian Ministry of the Interior's Dzerzhinskiy Division in the role of 'barrier squads' – punitive action, anti-retreat troops – behind the lines of rebels and Russian regulars. This has been reported at both the northern part of the rebel-controlled territory near Debaltseve and near Mariupol on the southern operational axis. On five identifiable occasions, detachments of the Dzerzhinskiy Division have undertaken punitive action against Russian regulars; rebels have also reported punitive actions by the Dzerzhinskiy Division against them. The necessity of such deployments further highlights problems the Russian command has with the morale of both its own troops and the rebels.

Taken together, these factors are the most compelling evidence yet of the lack of trained military personnel with which Russia might sustain operations against Ukraine. This is without further investigation of the actual combat capabilities of those deployed troops, which are assessed to be unsatisfactory, not least given these widespread reports of low morale.

Conclusion

There is evidence of Russian troops present in eastern Ukraine – not only in a command role and to operate advanced equipment, but as coherent fighting formations too. Those forces deployed to Ukraine, on or near the border, and in Crimea represent a serious and direct threat to Ukraine. That is due to the numbers of these Russian forces, which nearly matches that of all of Kiev's available combat forces. Further, rebel forces more or less under Russian control number half the total of Russian troops. Hence, Kiev cannot generate or count on numerical superiority.

The main strategic objective of Russian troops is to secure the continued existence of Russian-controlled 'republics' in eastern Ukraine. Yet Russia is having trouble sustaining its forces generated for the operation against Ukraine.

Under such circumstances, one cannot exclude the possibility that the Kremlin might opt to capitalise upon its relatively advantageous position – while it still exists – over a Ukrainian military that is currently weakened by its forced retreat from the Debaltseve area, in which it took substantial losses of equipment and probably manpower. This would also solidify the rebels' new territorial gains. The large industrial centre and seaport of Mariupol would be the most likely target.

Relocation of Russian and rebel forces from the Debaltseve area to concentrations north and east of Mariupol indicate that this option is certainly being considered in the Kremlin. Should this be the case, a further escalation of hostilities and a Russian military push to expand rebel-controlled territory remains a realistic possibility. 🌐

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The military aspects of Russian operations against Ukraine from 2014 to early 2015 will be discussed in greater detail in a forthcoming RUSI occasional paper, 'ZAPAD-2009 to Russian Spring: Russia's Military Operations against Ukraine, 2014–15'.

BRIEFING PAPER

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