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PILOT RETURN MIGRATION POLICY INDEX: CASE STUDY OF SLOVENIA **

INTRODUCTION

In response to the growing global importance of return migration as a key element of brain circulation, this paper presents the development of a pilot Return Migration Policy Index tailored to the Slovenian context. Designed to evaluate the feasibility and transferability of international return migration measures, the index is grounded in a multidimensional framework encompassing five core dimensions: Economy, Legal Order, Societal Openness to Immigrants, Migration History and Cultural Perception, and Official Language Accessibility. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, international best practices, and national policy analysis, each dimension was operationalized through specific indicators and weighted scoring criteria. The index was pilot-tested on 43 return migration measures adopted by various countries, allowing for both cross-national comparison and contextual relevance

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** This paper is the result of the research projects Mechanisms for Attracting Foreign and Reintegrating Domestic Experts to Strengthen Slovenia's Position in Global Digitalization Trends and Between Brain Drain and Brain Circulation: Study and Postdoctoral Training in Finland, both financially supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

to Slovenia. The results demonstrate the index's utility in identifying promising practices and institutional barriers, as well as its potential to inform more transparent, coherent, and evidence-based policymaking. By institutionalizing the index, Slovenia can strengthen its capacity to attract and reintegrate global talent, contributing to its long-term development and competitiveness in the global knowledge economy.

BRAIN CIRCULATION IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL MOBILITY

In the context of increasing global mobility and transnational flows of people, many countries have begun to formulate and implement targeted strategies aimed at encouraging the return of their own nationals, particularly those who are highly educated and professionally trained abroad. This phenomenon is part of a broader trend known as brain circulation, which is increasingly replacing the one-directional narrative of brain drain with a more dynamic understanding of knowledge exchange, professional mobility, and return migration (Saxenian 2005, 35; Wickramasekara 2011, 4–5).

Across Europe, Asia, and Latin America, national governments are developing returnee programs to attract individuals who left their home country for education, training, or employment opportunities abroad. These programs often include financial incentives, tax breaks, streamlined administrative procedures, support for housing and family reintegration, and career development schemes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2013, 118). In countries with significant diasporas, efforts are also directed toward the return of the descendants of emigrants, particularly those who maintain a cultural or emotional attachment to the country of their ancestors (Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003, 588; Ragazzi 2014, 73).

The motivation behind such policies is both economic and symbolic. On the one hand, states seek to harness the human capital and international experience of returnees to address domestic skills shortages, foster innovation, and enhance global competitiveness (Kapur and McHale 2005, 14). On the other hand, the return of emigrants or their descendants serves as a powerful affirmation of national identity, continuity, and global belonging (Délano and Gamlen 2014, 46).

Return migration policies are particularly relevant in the context of educational and professional mobility. Many individuals who study

abroad initially do not intend to settle permanently in the host country. However, attractive career opportunities, research conditions, or personal circumstances often lead to long-term or permanent stays (Teferra 2005, 54). Recognizing this, countries of origin have begun designing proactive measures to maintain connections with their nationals abroad and to facilitate their eventual return—whether temporarily or permanently (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2020, 7–12).

Some governments, such as those of Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Latvia, and Israel, have developed comprehensive national strategies to support the reintegration of returnees. These may include programs tailored to entrepreneurs, researchers, or young professionals, as well as initiatives aimed at revitalizing local communities by attracting returnees to less developed regions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia 2021). Other countries, such as Germany and Sweden, focus on creating favorable conditions for return through strong research infrastructure, social support systems, and inclusive labor market policies (Cassarino 2004, 268).

Moreover, the return of second- or third-generation emigrants—those born and raised abroad—is gaining traction as a specific policy focus. For such individuals, return is not always driven by economic necessity but often by a desire to reconnect with cultural roots, seek new opportunities in a more meaningful or values-driven environment, or benefit from programs aimed at diaspora engagement (King and Christou 2011, 454; Brinkerhoff 2016, 40). Countries such as Italy, Poland, and Armenia have introduced symbolic and material measures to welcome such returnees and facilitate their integration into local society (Düvell and Garapich 2011, 32).

Ultimately, the global competition for talent has pushed national governments to view their emigrants and their descendants not as lost citizens, but as mobile assets—individuals who can contribute to the development of their home country if appropriate pathways and incentives are provided (Gamlen 2014, 25). The challenge remains to ensure that return is not only possible but desirable, requiring continuous efforts to improve institutional openness, economic opportunities, and social inclusion in the country of return.

TYPES OF POLICY MEASURES ADOPTED BY STATES TO ENCOURAGE THE RETURN OF SKILLED MIGRANTS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS

In recent decades, a growing number of countries have introduced targeted policies to attract the return of highly skilled emigrants and the descendants of their diasporas. These measures respond to structural labor shortages, demographic shifts, global talent competition, and the increasing strategic importance of diasporas as agents of development, innovation, and transnational cooperation (Kapur and McHale 2005, 21; Gamlen 2014, 25).

The policy instruments implemented by national governments to encourage the return of skilled emigrants and their descendants can be broadly categorized into several thematic areas, each addressing distinct facets of the return migration process. First, financial and fiscal incentives represent a common approach, encompassing measures such as temporary tax exemptions (e.g., Italy's *Decreto Rientro dei Cervelli* and Portugal's non-habitual resident scheme), relocation grants, and entrepreneurship support through startup funding or preferential credit access (Le Coz 2021, 7–19). Second, research and academic mobility programs target returning scholars and scientists by offering dedicated grants, enhanced access to research infrastructure, and streamlined recognition of foreign qualifications (Teferra 2005, 54). Third, states have introduced measures under the rubric of administrative and legal facilitation, including centralized “one-stop shops” for returnee services, simplified visa and residency procedures, and expanded digital public services (Cassarino 2004, 268; IOM 2020, 7–12). Fourth, integration and reintegration support aims to ease the transition of returnees into local societies through mentorship initiatives, recognition of prior professional experience, and targeted family support policies (Brinkerhoff 2016, 40; King and Christou 2011, 454). Fifth, diaspora engagement and cultural reconnection initiatives strengthen identity-based ties through language courses, youth exchanges, and legal provisions such as the “right of return” or fast-track citizenship (Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003, 588; Ragazzi 2014, 73). Finally, symbolic and recognition-based measures seek to affirm the societal value of returnees by publicly acknowledging their contributions, organizing diaspora-focused events, and integrating returnee perspectives into policymaking processes (Délano and Gamlen 2014, 46; Gamlen 2019, 14). Together, these categories illustrate the

multidimensional nature of return migration governance and the diverse policy tools deployed to attract and retain mobile talent.

WHY DEVELOP A PILOT INDEX FOR EVALUATING RETURN MIGRATION MEASURES?

In recent years, Slovenia has increasingly recognized the strategic importance of facilitating the return of educated and professionally trained individuals residing abroad. While several policy initiatives already exist—such as targeted programs for researchers and entrepreneurs—there is currently no comprehensive tool for systematically evaluating the effectiveness, coherence, and long-term impact of these measures. This institutional gap prompted the project team, under the framework of the research project “Mechanisms for Attracting Foreign and Returning Domestic Experts to Strengthen Slovenia’s Position in Global Digitalization Trends”, to propose the development of a pilot index to assess return migration policy.

The decision to create such an index was driven by several key factors identified in the project’s baseline assessment: 1. Lack of a centralized and consistent database on returning experts, which would enable longitudinal analysis of their contributions; 2. Insufficient institutional coordination across relevant ministries and implementing agencies (e.g., education, labor, diaspora affairs); 3. Fragmentation of policy instruments, which are often under-publicized or difficult to access for potential returnees. Absence of performance indicators to evaluate which programs work, for whom, and under what conditions. These shortcomings mirror challenges observed in other small states with significant diasporas and limited policy integration (Gamlen 2014, 25; Cassarino 2004, 268). Additionally, the international literature and best practices emphasize that return migration should not be understood merely as a one-time event, but rather as a complex, multidimensional process embedded in broader patterns of brain circulation and transnational engagement (Saxenian 2005, 35; Wickramasekara 2011, 4).

Countries such as Ireland, Estonia, and Portugal have moved in recent years toward evidence-based models of return policy design, introducing monitoring frameworks and performance metrics to assess the cost-effectiveness and societal benefits of their programs (Le Coz 2021, 14–16). In this context, Slovenia currently lacks an equivalent evaluative mechanism, which makes it difficult to assess the return on

public investment in such schemes or to adapt them based on real-time feedback.

The development of the pilot index is driven by a set of interrelated objectives aimed at enhancing the strategic management of return migration policies in Slovenia. Foremost among these is the creation of a structured and comparative framework that allows for the systematic evaluation of return-related programs over time. In doing so, the index establishes a foundation for regular reporting, enabling policymakers to monitor progress, identify implementation gaps, and formulate data-driven reforms. Crucially, the index is designed to integrate both quantitative metrics—such as program participation and employment rates—and qualitative dimensions, including user experience and accessibility, into a cohesive evaluative tool. By incorporating the perspectives of returnees themselves, the index ensures that policy assessment reflects not only institutional intentions but also lived experiences (Brinkerhoff 2016, 40; King and Christou 2011, 454). Furthermore, the tool promotes greater transparency and accountability by making information on return migration measures more accessible to domestic and international stakeholders. Importantly, the index is not envisioned as a purely statistical mechanism; rather, it serves as a strategic instrument for institutional learning, cross-sectoral coordination, and adaptive policymaking. By enabling Slovenia to benchmark its return migration efforts against relevant international practices—while remaining attuned to its national context—the index aspires to contribute to a more inclusive, sustainable, and evidence-based migration governance system.

DESIGNING THE PILOT INDEX: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND KEY DIMENSIONS

The development of the pilot index for evaluating return migration measures in Slovenia was grounded in a recognition of the need for a systematic, multidimensional, and evidence-based assessment of public policies aimed at facilitating the return and reintegration of skilled nationals and members of the diaspora. Drawing from the findings of the national CRP research project and informed by international frameworks (e.g., OECD, IOM, EU), the project team adopted a multi-step methodology focused on conceptual clarity, stakeholder relevance, and practical usability.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The process began with a comprehensive review of international good practices and analytical tools, including return migration dashboards used in countries such as Portugal, Spain, Austria, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Israel. These were complemented by policy evaluation methodologies used by the European Commission and diaspora engagement indicators proposed by IOM and the Migration Governance Framework (IOM 2020, 7–12).

At the national level, we conducted a mapping of Slovenian return-related programs, including the Dr. Aleš Debeljak Program (for returning researchers), incentives for diaspora entrepreneurship, and diaspora cultural engagement activities. Semi-structured interviews were organized with returnees, policymakers, and civil society actors to identify gaps, barriers, and opportunities within the existing system. We also conducted interviews with experts from Portugal, Finland, and Israel.

The guiding methodological principles were: 1. Relevance (alignment with Slovenia's strategic migration and development goals); 2. Feasibility (availability of data and responsible institutions); 3. Comparability (potential to benchmark across time or countries), 4. Inclusiveness (incorporation of returnee experience and expert feedback). Based on this process, five main dimensions (Economy, Legal Order, Societal Openness to Immigrants, Migration History and Cultural Perception, and Official Language Accessibility) were selected, each representing a critical area of state intervention.

DEFINING DIMENSIONS AND INDICATORS FOR THE PILOT INDEX

To enable a structured and nuanced evaluation of the feasibility and applicability of various return migration measures in Slovenia, we developed a pilot index composed of five key dimensions. Each dimension includes specific indicators, and where appropriate, sub-criteria. These dimensions reflect a combination of economic, legal, sociocultural, and historical factors relevant to the return and integration of skilled migrants and diaspora members.

The selection of the five dimensions—Economy, Legal Order, Societal Openness to Immigrants, Migration History and Cultural Perception, and Official Language Accessibility—was based on a thorough

interdisciplinary analysis of return migration literature, national policy gaps, and contextual priorities specific to Slovenia. Each dimension addresses a distinct yet interrelated domain that can significantly influence the success of return policies.

Economy was selected to capture the structural readiness of the national economic system to absorb returnees and offer meaningful, sustainable employment opportunities. High-skilled individuals are more likely to return if they can find or create jobs that match their expertise and aspirations. Economic incentives and the overall productivity of the labor market are key motivating factors.

Legal Order was included due to its central role in regulating the conditions of return, residence, work authorization, and entrepreneurship. A transparent, efficient, and inclusive legal framework lowers the administrative burden for returnees and increases policy credibility. The rule of law is also critical for protecting rights and building institutional trust.

Societal Openness to Immigrants was chosen to assess the sociocultural climate in which returnees and newcomers must navigate. Public attitudes toward immigrants, the accessibility of services, and support networks are essential for successful integration and long-term retention. This dimension helps capture intangible barriers that may not be reflected in legal provisions alone.

Migration History and Cultural Perception was added to address the legacy of past emigration, particularly forced or politically motivated displacement. For many second- or third-generation diaspora members, returning to Slovenia involves negotiating complex emotional and identity-based dynamics shaped by family histories and social narratives. This dimension recognizes the long-term influence of historical memory on policy outcomes.

Official Language Accessibility was incorporated to evaluate how language functions as both an enabler and barrier to reintegration. While English is widely used in global academia and business, the acquisition of Slovenian is often essential for social inclusion, civic participation, and deeper cultural integration. Balancing these linguistic needs is crucial in shaping inclusive policy. These dimensions were deliberately selected to ensure the index captures both structural (legal, economic) and human-centered (cultural, linguistic, historical) elements of return migration, making it a holistic tool for evaluating the feasibility of diverse policy measures.

ECONOMY

This dimension assesses the structural conditions of the national economy, focusing on labor market flexibility and the overall capacity of the economic environment to support high-impact return migration policies. The analysis was guided by several key questions: How does the socio-economic system in Slovenia compare with those in selected reference countries? What financial and structural advantages can Slovenia offer to potential returnees, particularly in light of its GDP trends and fiscal outlook? And crucially, is the Slovenian economy sufficiently robust to absorb skilled returnees and sustain high-value-added employment opportunities?

To operationalize this dimension, we identified three equally weighted indicators. The first is the growth of value added per employee, which captures productivity, innovation potential, and the economy's readiness to integrate high-skilled labor. The second is labor market flexibility, measured through job vacancy rates and the ability of employers to recruit qualified personnel. The third indicator is the standard of living, calculated based on a financial threshold equivalent to 1.5 times the national average salary. Collectively, these indicators not only reflect the structural attractiveness of Slovenia as a return destination but also highlight the potential economic gains that return migration can generate.

LEGAL ORDER

This dimension examines the extent to which the legal and institutional framework in Slovenia facilitates return migration and supports entrepreneurial activity among returnees. The analysis was informed by several core questions: How accessible and transparent is Slovenia's legal environment? To what degree can returnees efficiently regularize their residence and employment status? And what forms of institutional support are available through universities and public agencies for individuals seeking to establish businesses upon return?

To evaluate these aspects, five equally weighted indicators were defined. The first, clarity of the legal framework, assesses the availability and comprehensibility of relevant legal documents. The second, status regularization mechanisms, captures the speed and ease with which residency and work permits can be obtained. The third

indicator, academic and entrepreneurial conditions, evaluates the quality of the higher education sector and the availability of incentives for startups. The fourth, social benefits and entitlements, considers the scope and accessibility of targeted programs for returnees. Finally, debureaucratization efforts measure the degree to which policy reforms and digital public services reduce administrative burdens.

The legal and institutional environment is especially significant for returnees who may be unfamiliar with domestic regulations or administrative procedures. A clear, supportive, and efficient legal framework not only enhances policy credibility but also plays a decisive role in returnees' decisions to reintegrate and invest their skills in the home country.

SOCIETAL OPENNESS TO IMMIGRANTS

This dimension explores the overall societal openness in Slovenia toward foreigners and returnees, with particular attention to their ability to access essential information, build support networks, and integrate into local communities. The evaluation was guided by key questions such as: How accessible is Slovenia to international students and researchers? And what kinds of institutional or informal support structures are available to facilitate their integration?

To capture these dynamics, four indicators were established. The first, information accessibility, measures the availability of relevant resources in both Slovenian and English, which is critical for effective navigation of public services and institutions. The second, social support networks, assesses the presence of community organizations, social events, and mentorship programs that assist newcomers in building connections. The third indicator, general sense of safety, draws on public safety rankings and recorded instances of discrimination to evaluate the societal climate for returnees. The fourth, integration metrics, considers the migration balance of highly educated individuals as a proxy for the inclusiveness and attractiveness of the host environment. Societal receptiveness and clear integration pathways are vital for creating a welcoming atmosphere that not only encourages return but also supports the long-term reintegration of returnees into the social and professional fabric of the country.

MIGRATION HISTORY AND CULTURAL PERCEPTION

This qualitative dimension addresses the historical and cultural context shaping emigration and return in Slovenia. It reflects the enduring influence of past experiences—particularly those related to post-World War II political exile—on contemporary perceptions of returnees. Discussions within the project highlighted how public narratives, societal attitudes, and lingering stereotypes can affect both the willingness of emigrants to return and the ease of their reintegration. In this regard, return migration is not merely a logistical or economic process, but also a deeply symbolic and identity-driven experience.

To assess this dimension, two equally weighted indicators were defined. The first, cultural-historical background, evaluates how historical narratives of emigration influence present-day readiness for integration, including the presence of stigma or contested belonging. The second, support mechanisms, considers the existence and effectiveness of organizations that facilitate cultural reintegration and actively work to counter bias or exclusion.

This dimension is particularly significant for second- and third-generation descendants of emigrants, for whom the decision to return is often shaped not only by opportunity structures, but also by emotional ties, inherited memories, and a desire to reconnect with ancestral heritage. Understanding these cultural and historical dynamics is therefore essential to designing return policies that are both inclusive and responsive to the complex realities of transnational identity.

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE ACCESSIBILITY

The final dimension assesses the role of language in the return and reintegration process, recognizing it as both a potential barrier and a critical enabler of successful integration. The analysis was guided by two central questions: To what extent are public services and educational resources available in a widely spoken lingua franca, particularly English? And how accessible are Slovenian language learning opportunities for newcomers and returnees alike?

To operationalize this dimension, two indicators were established. The first, the availability of information in English, evaluates whether essential information and services are provided in a language that facilitates immediate functionality within the host society. The second,

promotion of Slovenian language learning, examines the extent to which affordable and publicly supported language courses are available, helping returnees and immigrants acquire the linguistic skills necessary for long-term social inclusion and civic participation.

Linguistic accessibility is especially important for returnees who may have grown up abroad without exposure to the Slovenian language or cultural context. Ensuring both the availability of English-language resources and robust support for Slovenian language acquisition is therefore vital for fostering an inclusive environment that accommodates diverse return pathways.

WEIGHTED EVALUATION APPROACH

The index was designed as a weighted scoring system, rather than an unweighted composite. Each dimension is assigned a weight based on its relative importance to the specific policy being assessed. The overall index score (ranging from 0 to 5) represents the sum of all weighted dimension scores: Final Index Score = Σ (Weight \times Dimension Score).

For each return policy or measure evaluated, detailed justifications for the assigned weights and scores were provided. This approach allows for flexible adaptation and ensures that the index reflects the specific requirements and feasibility conditions of diverse return migration initiatives.

PILOT TESTING AND EVALUATION OF POLICY MEASURES

The creation of a multidimensional index for evaluating return and attraction policies is inherently exploratory and experimental. As such, our process began with a pilot assessment of selected policy measures using the weighted scoring method outlined above. Both quantitative and qualitative data were applied to generate meaningful and balanced evaluations.

The first phase involved a test scoring of return migration policies from selected countries. Indicators were scored on a five-point scale (1–5), and scores were multiplied by dimension-specific weights. The selection of weights was internally validated through structured discussions within the research team. Particular attention was given to dimensions 2 (Legal Order), 4 (Migration History and Cultural Perception), and 5 (Language

Accessibility), where it was challenging to balance the targeted nature of the measure in the original country against its transferability and applicability to the Slovenian context.

To address this, a consensus was reached: 50% of the final policy score would derive from the internal quality of the measure, while the remaining 50% would assess its relevance and feasibility for implementation in Slovenia. This adjustment proved crucial, especially for culturally specific or niche policies—such as reconciliation measures or initiatives attracting elite talent—where contextual factors dominate.

Subsequently, a total of 43 policy measures were distributed among members of the research team for individual evaluation. Each member applied the weighting scheme to score the measures independently. This was followed by a cross-validation phase: each member was assigned a peer's evaluated set of measures to review and critique. Comments, reflections, and discrepancies were compiled in a shared document and discussed in a team meeting to ensure consistency, reliability, and transparency across evaluations. The resulting dataset not only enabled comparative analysis of return migration policies but also served as a proof of concept for refining the pilot index in future iterations.

PROPOSED POLICY MEASURES AND IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR SLOVENIA

Based on the comparative analysis of international return migration policies and the application of our pilot evaluation index, we propose a series of policy measures that could significantly enhance Slovenia's ability to attract and reintegrate both foreign experts and returnees from its diaspora. These recommendations are grounded in best practices identified in countries such as Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Germany, and Israel, and are adapted to Slovenia's demographic, economic, and administrative context.

Based on the comparative evaluation of international return migration policies and the application of the pilot index, several concrete policy measures are proposed to enhance Slovenia's capacity to attract and reintegrate returnees and diaspora professionals. These recommendations draw on successful practices from countries such as Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Israel, and Italy, while being tailored to Slovenia's specific administrative, economic, and demographic context.

First, the creation of a Central Coordinating Office for Return Migration would provide a unified institutional platform for return-related services. Inspired by Portugal’s “Welcome Office” and Israel’s returnee support centers, such an office in Slovenia could offer centralized legal advice, housing and employment assistance, and integration support. Effective implementation would require inter-ministerial coordination—particularly among the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Labor, and Internal Affairs—as well as targeted investments in digital infrastructure and the inclusion of diaspora representatives in the design and governance of services.

Second, the introduction of return incentives and financial support schemes could significantly improve the attractiveness of return. These might include temporary tax relief, subsidies for returnee entrepreneurs, and housing grants, modeled on programs such as Italy’s *Rientro dei Cervelli* and Ireland’s *Safe Home* initiative. Key implementation steps would involve revising national tax legislation to accommodate return-specific provisions, coordinating with the national development fund and employment agency, and defining transparent eligibility criteria based on duration abroad, qualifications, or sectoral relevance.

Third, measures aimed at recognizing transnational experience and supporting dual careers are essential. Returnees frequently bring valuable international knowledge and skills, particularly in fields such as academia and healthcare. Policymakers should facilitate the automatic recognition of foreign qualifications, provide dual-career support for returning couples, and expand access to national and European funding programs targeting returnee researchers and entrepreneurs.

Fourth, Slovenia should formalize diaspora engagement through institutional representation. Following the examples of Ireland and Germany, this could involve establishing a Council for Slovenians Abroad with consultative status, integrating diaspora affairs into national strategic frameworks, and offering dual citizenship or expedited reintegration rights for the descendants of exiles and emigrants.

Fifth, it is necessary to develop tailored integration measures for second- and third-generation returnees, who often face distinct cultural and linguistic challenges. This could include culturally sensitive reintegration programs, Slovenian language courses both abroad and domestically, and partnerships with diaspora schools and cultural organizations to foster smoother transitions.

Sixth, Slovenia should invest in strategic communication and outreach campaigns to reshape public perceptions of return migration and highlight its societal benefits. This includes launching media campaigns that profile successful returnees, building a digital platform for skills matching between returnees and domestic employers, and mobilizing influencers and diaspora networks to strengthen trust and engagement.

Finally, the institutionalization of robust monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms is critical. The pilot index developed in this study could serve as a foundation for ongoing monitoring of return migration policies. To support this, the government should designate a statistical agency or policy observatory to maintain and refine the index, conduct regular data collection on return flows, and fund qualitative research that captures the lived experiences and evolving needs of returnees. Together, these measures offer a roadmap for developing a more coordinated, inclusive, and evidence-based approach to return migration in Slovenia.

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