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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Water politics – Between desertification and securitization – Time for a Blue Diplomacy’

(own-initiative opinion)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. Given the cross-cutting nature of water, and the fact that water scarcity is a global problem, a common and comprehensive approach on a global scale is needed. Therefore, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) calls for the Nexus approach ⁽¹⁾ to be widely implemented and the experiences and best practices of Member States, businesses, civil society organisations and local communities need to be fully considered in the development and implementation of blue diplomacy.

1.2. Due to increasing global water scarcity, water is understood as a strategic security asset, which provides advanced positions to those states that are in control of it. To this end, the EU should focus increasing efforts on blue diplomacy and streamline it in its foreign policy and external relations, including neighbourhood, trade, and development policies. The World Economic Forum Global Risks Report identifies water scarcity among the most probable and impactful threats. Nevertheless, water could become an instrument of peace and development. Determined blue diplomacy action is thus needed.

1.3. As climate change has a major impact on water conditions, climate diplomacy and blue diplomacy are closely connected. While primarily promoting global action to fight climate change, the EU needs to focus efforts on cooperation in addressing the consequences of the climate crisis, within the framework of its adaptation strategy. Blue diplomacy is intrinsically linked to EU health diplomacy as well, given that adequate, accessible and affordable Water, Sanitation and Hygiene — WASH — services are imperative for public health and human development.

1.4. Water is not a mere commodity but a public good crucial to human life. The EU should support easy and uninterrupted access to affordable water for everyone throughout the world and facilitate sustainable water and wastewater management through cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, technologies and expertise as part of economic partnerships and development cooperation. The Global Gateway is an excellent tool in that respect ⁽²⁾, also considering the objectives of the European Economic Security Strategy ⁽³⁾ and particularly its priority regarding partnering and further strengthening cooperation with countries worldwide.

⁽¹⁾ Introduced by the UfM Water Policy Framework for Actions 2030.

⁽²⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on The Global Gateway (own-initiative opinion) (JOIN(2021) 30 — final) (OJ C 323, 26.8.2022, p. 27).

⁽³⁾ JOIN(2023) 20 final Brussels, 20.6.2023.

1.5. Allocating the right funding- public and private -to the improvement of existing facilities and infrastructure, and the construction of new ones, is a fundamental condition for internationally ensuring fair access to clean water and sanitation for the entire global population. Improving water management requires investment in research, innovation and knowledge sharing, as well as in the deployment of new and advanced technologies, including digital water solutions. It also necessitates improving infrastructure for flood control and water conservation. More attention also needs to be paid to international measures ensuring critical infrastructure security, including cybersecurity and security against natural disasters and physical attacks, as recent conflicts have shown.

1.6. The EU should raise awareness of water's crucial role and greater understanding of the interconnections between the various roles of water and the mutual dependencies of the different actors. A European Water Centre should be set up in order to help both Member States and other countries in need in the European neighbourhood and beyond.

1.7. The European Water Centre should highlight cases where collaboration between EU Member States sharing rivers and lakes is exemplary, and where it lies below the desired level and recommend policy tools for the promotion of Blue Deal policy objectives.

1.8. The EU should also enhance and facilitate blue diplomacy networks, considering that blue diplomacy requires cooperation between various actors: government representatives, water authorities and agencies, academia and research institutions, private sector, social partners and civil society organisations.

1.9. The EU should develop special instruments to promote cooperation and joint water management policies in transboundary lake and river basins, within and beyond the EU borders.

1.10. The EU should consider the protection of wetlands and biodiversity as an essential part of blue diplomacy, and the EESC calls for their integration into blue diplomacy strategic priorities.

1.11. The sustainable management of southeastern European transboundary rivers, lakes and wetlands should acquire priority, given their high significance or the protection of European biodiversity.

1.12. The EESC supports that one of the key strategic aims of blue diplomacy should be to upgrade the UN treaty framework related to water-related issues, in light of recent international developments, the climate and water crisis.

1.13. While the primary objective of blue diplomacy is to prevent water-related tensions and conflicts, there is evident need for the EU to simultaneously contribute to conflict resolution. Not only does the EU have the opportunity to act as a mediator between the parties involved in conflicts, but it could also have a significant role to play in cooperation for conflict recovery.

1.14. The EESC recommends that additional measures should be taken to prevent the weaponisation of water, which has been observed again in recent conflicts — the most severe being the Nova Kakhovka crisis, the detrimental social, economic and environmental effects of which are yet to be analysed.

1.15. The EESC underlines the need that the EU actively use its potential to bring peace and sustainability, and be a driver of innovation and change in the Mediterranean and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, where transboundary waters are often subject to disputes, further aggravating climate change and desertification. To that end, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and its Water Expert Group work should be praised and closer cooperation and synergies developed.

1.16. The EESC welcomes the EU voluntary commitments made during the UN Water Conference and calls on the EU to further use its existing policy instruments to seek effective and efficient solutions in the long-term.

1.17. A macro regional strategy at the scale of the Mediterranean may indeed support more cohesion in the basin, based on the principles of a gradual and voluntary approach, shared multilevel governance and variable geometry responding to the needs and territorial specificities. As a complement to the frameworks, initiatives and programmes already in place in the area, an overarching macro regional strategy would allow an increased coherence and integration between these actions already in place, while allowing complementarity, more rationality in the use of resources and efficient joint work towards finding common ground for economic, social and environmental cohesion and solutions to shared challenges.

1.18. Blue diplomacy should develop strategic priorities in regions where water stress and water-related conflicts abound, such as the Mediterranean and the MENA region, where both EU and non-EU Member States face unprecedented challenges related to water. It is essential that the Blue Deal develops a clear Mediterranean dimension and puts water-related focus on the MENA region, given the acute nature of water stress.

1.19. Blue diplomacy should also pay special attention to the situation in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the neighbouring regions of Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Nile, Niger and Congo transboundary river basins, the Great Lakes and Lake Chad transboundary lake basins, and develop proactive tools for preventing a water-crisis related increase in migration flows towards the European Union.

2. General comments

2.1. Of all the natural resources, water has become the most precious. Global water scarcity is a severe challenge for continued human development, and the achievement of several UN Sustainable Development Goals. Despite three-quarters of our planet being made up of water, most of the Earth's abundant water is not usable, and only 2,5 % constitutes freshwater, of which less than 1 % is easily accessible. Moreover, freshwater bodies are continuously facing a reduction in terms of quality and quantity.

2.2. The EESC declared that water is not a mere commodity but a public good essential to human life. Easy and affordable access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) for all is imperative for public health and human development. In 2010, the UN General Assembly explicitly recognised the human right to water and sanitation, and the Human Rights Council resolutions (43/32) endorsed in 2020 guarantee the right to access to water during conflicts, such as the case of the Palestine-Israel conflict. However, some 2,2 billion people currently lack access to drinking water and basic water services worldwide, and still more than half of the world's population does not have access to safe sanitation.

2.3. Currently, 30 % of the world's groundwater is being depleted, and there is increasing concern about the quality of groundwater. Roughly, 3,6 billion people face inadequate access to water at least one month per year, and this number is expected to increase to more than 5 billion by 2050. A 55 % increase in water demand is also expected by 2050, and about 1/3 of the world's population will not have access to quality drinking water.

2.4. According to the European Environment Agency, water stress occurs when the demand for water exceeds the available amount during a certain period, or when poor quality restricts its use. As the world population continues to grow and water is increasingly scarce, water-related conflicts and geopolitical instability around the world are not hard to predict.

2.5. There is also a strong gender and social dimension in WASH-related issues. Without safely managed WASH services, women, girls and children are more vulnerable to abuse, assault and disease, affecting their ability to study, work and live in dignity. It is widely recognised that women and girls are disproportionately affected by the lack of WASH services, however, their voices and needs are often absent in the design and implementation of policies, thus ensuring their continued marginalisation.

2.6. WASH services must be globally more inclusive also in terms of accessibility to people with disabilities. Social and physical barriers may undermine the health and dignity of people with disabilities, and the absence of adequate facilities could further affect relationships, school enrolment, and employment. This also applies to other vulnerable groups.

2.7. As a transversal resource, freshwater is also essential to a wide range of economic sectors, including agriculture, industries, tourism, energy and transport. Water thus contributes significantly to wealth creation and jobs. Those regions most impacted by water shortages could see their growth rates drop by up to 6 % of GDP by 2050.

2.8. Water stress threatens the resilience of some areas of the world, fuels inequalities and raises food security concerns. Water stress and desertification often lead to the securitization of water supply. Unequal access to water fuels social instability, and consequently, results in local and international conflicts and tensions. Once again, it will be the poorest who will suffer the most from water stress and desertification. Since 2010, there have been more than 466 conflicts worldwide over water control, most of them in Africa and the Middle East. This can also lead to war and the reinforcement of migration waves towards the global North, particularly the European Union.

2.9. Climate change is also increasing the frequency, intensity, extent, and duration of droughts in many parts of the world. According to forecasts, droughts may affect over three-quarters of the world's population by 2050 ⁽⁴⁾. Various UN reports estimate that by 2050, a combination of water and climate-related problems and conflicts will force approximately a billion people to migrate. In the global south in particular, access to water is heavily restricted. This will further encourage displacement and migration towards the global north. The EESC, therefore, calls for the root causes (including water scarcity) to be tackled, rather than taking action against the refugees themselves, in order to curb these developments.

2.10. Conflicts are often linked to diversion for irrigation or the industry, management of scarcity and floods, pollution, or navigation. However, water stress caused by extreme events and growing water scarcity have already led to conflicts over access to and control of water resources across the globe. The climate crisis will exacerbate this situation. In many cases, as transboundary waters account for 60 % of the world's freshwater flows and 153 countries have territory within at least one transboundary river, and lake basins, conflicts or disputes involve two or more countries. The EESC, therefore, calls for tools to tackle water scarcity globally and to prevent conflicts.

2.11. Water is increasingly being weaponised by conflict parties, particularly in the Middle East. The Syrian Civil War has become a negative example of this. The Syrian Government has cut off water to millions of civilians, ISIS regularly withheld water from communities under their control and Turkey has been accused of stopping the Alouk water station's operations. In January 2022, Russia bombed a water station in Idlib ⁽⁵⁾.

2.12. As unfortunately seen in the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, water retention or contamination has been used as a weapon of war ⁽⁶⁾. In the city of Mariupol, the Russian armed forces deliberately cut off the Ukrainian population's access to drinking water, using the threat of dehydration to force the population to surrender, and denying access to the most basic needs. The destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam has further exacerbated the overall crisis.

3. Blue diplomacy action and policy measures

3.1. Water scarcity, and related tensions and weaponisation, pose a rising threat to international peace and stability. Nevertheless, water could become an instrument of peace and development. Concrete blue diplomacy action is thus needed.

3.2. Blue diplomacy (also known as water diplomacy or hydro diplomacy) has been described as a 'dynamic, politically oriented process that aims to prevent, mitigate, and resolve water-related tensions in shared waters by making simultaneous use of diplomatic tools, water-related know-how and cooperation mechanisms across multiple diplomacy tracks' ⁽⁷⁾.

⁽⁴⁾ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/desertification-day>

⁽⁵⁾ <https://syriaaccountability.org/too-little-water-too-much-war-wheat-shortages-in-syria/>

⁽⁶⁾ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/14-million-people-without-running-water-across-war-affected-eastern-ukraine>

⁽⁷⁾ Keskinen et. al. 2021, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022169421007873>

3.3. Water related challenges highlight the importance of international governance structures in managing water resources and preventing water related tensions. The recent UN 2023 Water Conference⁽⁸⁾ was as a rare occasion to mobilise all parties involved and to share information on the best practices and actions already undertaken, as well as on voluntary commitment to further action⁽⁹⁾. The EESC finds it important to ensure continued global cooperation on this topic and the proper implementation of the objectives and targets set so far. Special attention should also be paid to the development of regional governance structures focusing on transboundary river and lake basins.

3.4. The UN Conventions on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention)⁽¹⁰⁾, adopted in Helsinki in 1992, and the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses⁽¹¹⁾, are unique international legal instruments with the important aim of ensuring the sustainable use of cross-boundary water resources through cooperation. In addition, other international agreements such as the Protocol on Water and Health⁽¹²⁾ and the recently agreed UN High Seas Treaty are important tools that need to be fully and swiftly implemented.

3.5. The Paris Agreement on climate change and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda offer valuable guidelines on how blue diplomacy can be developed globally. In particular, the SDG 6 focuses on clean water and sanitation, and includes, inter alia, targets for transboundary water management and for international cooperation. Given the urgency of a timely implementation of SDG 6, its targets, and, more generally, the Paris Agreement, both the Global Gateway and NDICI — Global Europe, could be concrete and effective instruments in this regard.

3.6. Prevention of water related problems and tensions should be considered as the most important blue diplomacy action. To this end, the EU should contribute to the sustainable management of water resources on a global scale. Water governance and the role of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) are recognised as key processes for the coordinated development and sustainable management of water, land and related resources.

3.7. It is also imperative to develop international policies to promote sparing and efficient use of water in all sectors of the economy and society, to reduce the pollution of ground waters and surface waters, as well as to restore polluted and degraded waters.

3.8. With respect to climate-water linkages, the work of the World Meteorological Organisation is of great importance and value, as it organises, promotes and accelerates important regional cooperation projects — e.g. monitoring and data management, dealing with early warning systems, and analysis of climate changes and their effect on water, all of which are important ingredients of blue diplomacy.

3.9. Water resources are also linked to the protection of biodiversity. While water is essential to maintain natural processes and sustain thriving and healthy ecosystems, healthy land and ecosystems offer natural long-term storage for freshwater. Enhanced land and aquatic systems management and restoration provide sustainable water management solutions and can be deployed rapidly, at a relatively low cost and with modest technological requirements.

3.10. Moreover, blue diplomacy is intrinsically linked to EU health diplomacy, given that adequate WASH services are *sine qua non* for public health. Since water is a public good, ensuring adequate public infrastructure and facilities is crucial, to allow easy access to clean, safe and affordable water for all. Due attention should also be focused on proper wastewater management.

3.11. To this end, the EU should support global access to affordable water for everyone and facilitate sustainable water management through cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, technologies and expertise as part of economic partnerships and development cooperation. The Global Gateway is an excellent tool in that respect⁽¹³⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ <https://sdgs.un.org/conferences/water2023>

⁽⁹⁾ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7443-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

⁽¹⁰⁾ https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XXVII-5&chapter=27&clang=_en

⁽¹¹⁾ <https://unece.org/environment-policy/water/un-watercourses-convention>

⁽¹²⁾ <https://unece.org/environment-policy/water/protocol-on-water-and-health/about-the-protocol/introduction>

⁽¹³⁾ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

3.12. Allocating the right funding to the improvement of existing facilities and infrastructure and, where appropriate, the construction of new ones, is a fundamental condition for ensuring fair access to clean water for the entire global population. Both public and private funding (including EU funds and RRF, and finance from the EIB and EBRD) are necessary for long-term investment in water management and infrastructure. Through its European Southern Neighbourhood, the EU is engaged in water-related actions that help mobilise funding for water management, water efficiency, sanitation and wastewater reuse, de-pollution (in particular plastic pollution) and climate adaptation.

3.13. New technologies have the potential to deliver significant outcomes in the water sector. Improving water management requires research and innovation, data and knowledge sharing, while continuing to support the transition to digital water solutions. The EU is committed to supporting water research, including international R&I cooperation, as in the case of the Partnership for R&I in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) (water availability for agriculture) with EUR 494 million in funding for 2018-2024.

3.14. The EU should also raise awareness of water's crucial role in creating economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development. In particular, a greater understanding of the interconnections between the various roles of water and the mutual dependencies of the different actors is needed. The water-energy-food nexus is a typical linkage that should be evaluated in its entirety. On the other hand, the EU could help identify water related risks, as well as tensions between various actors.

3.15. In addition to awareness raising, the EU can support training and improving the technical and managerial capacities of organisations working in the water sector and water governance in general. The EU could also play a more active role in enhancing and facilitating blue diplomacy networks, considering that it requires cooperation between various actors: government representatives, water authorities and agencies, academia and research institutions, private sector and civil society organisations, also seizing the potential of female actors.

3.16. Civil society plays key roles in pushing for new instruments, programmes, or strategies on water issues. Initiatives such as 'Right2Water', the first European Citizens Initiative that shed light on water as a human right and foreign policy tool⁽¹⁴⁾, manifest the value of civic mobilisation. The European Climate Pact aims to become a lively space to share information, to debate and act on the climate crisis by involving citizens, their organisations and businesses.

3.17. With respect to advancing blue diplomacy in the implementation of trade agreements concluded by the EU and third parties, EESC Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) comprise valuable tools, as they bring together business organisations, trade unions and environmental organisations.

3.18. The EESC points out that water is a public good and should therefore be accessible for everyone at an affordable price. As the scarcity of water resources rises, a trade approach is applied towards water. While such an approach could offer certain advantages in re-distributing the scarce resource, measures should be taken to ensure self-sufficiency of all regions — making use of trade agreements and negotiations, and taking into account the fact that water is a public good and not a mere commodity and where necessary adopting regulations in consultation with the relevant stakeholders.

3.19. Beyond the traditional international water conventions and sustainable development goals, there are numerous bilateral, regional and global bodies, instruments and processes where the EU can contribute to water diplomacy.

3.20. Transboundary rivers in Europe raise a number of issues for water pollution and water-sharing, which need to be addressed. As the cases of the Danube Commission, the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (CCNR), the International Sava River Basin Commission and the Mosel Commission proved, there is a rich collection of European river-related experiences that could be used in the EU's blue diplomacy activities.

⁽¹⁴⁾ <https://right2water.eu/>

3.21. With a view to the European water and sanitation related experience, scientific knowledge and resources — as part of the active blue diplomacy efforts of the EU — a European Water Centre reporting directly to DG ENV and EEAS should be set up to help both Member States and other countries to address water-related issues in the European neighbourhood and beyond.

3.22. Sharing information on the blue diplomacy practices and experiences of Member States is an important way for the EU to strengthen its influence. For example, Finland has launched a project on ‘Water cooperation and peace — Finnish water way’⁽¹⁵⁾, which aims to strengthen Finnish water diplomacy collaboration internationally, enhance international transboundary agreements and their implementation, identify and respond to water diplomacy training and competence-building needs, and deepen cooperation between experts in foreign and security policy, peace mediation and the water sector.

4. The Mediterranean and Middle East and North Africa Region

4.1. The Mediterranean region is warming 20 % faster than the global average, and it is already facing major challenges related to water stress. There is extensive evidence that climate change will impact the Mediterranean in various ways, the fishing industry as well as biodiversity will be challenged by invasive species, the region will become dryer and warmer and the intensity of extreme events and droughts will increase. Mediterranean EU Member States are increasingly threatened by desertification, affecting primarily coastal and island regions.

4.2. Despite significant sub-regional differences, the entire MENA region faces similar challenges. The drivers of water-related risks in these countries are, among others, increasing population and water demand, climate change and outdated water management systems. Furthermore, poor governance, corruption and recurring conflicts make it almost impossible to implement countermeasures.

4.3. Large regions of sub-Saharan Africa face significant water stress-related challenges. Lack of international response is likely to lead to migration waves, intra-state and international conflict.

4.4. As many industries need water to be productive e.g., agriculture and energy, water scarcity can put whole economic sectors of Mediterranean and MENA states making a substantial contribution to GDP at risk. The EESC stresses that these industries must intensify their efforts to improve water efficiency and reuse to the greatest extent possible.

4.5. Uncontrolled tourism growth can have significant impact on water stress across the Mediterranean. The volume of inbound global travellers is expected to continue expanding in the coming years, leading to high anthropogenic pressure, which, combined with severe changes in land use, will have a direct impact on water and land consumption and the degradation of ecosystem services.

4.6. While countries like Malta, Israel and Spain have emerged as leaders in water management and water efficiency policies, regional cooperation on the subject is still insufficient. However, the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) provides an integrative policy framework for all stakeholders to translate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to regional, sub-regional, national and local levels in the Mediterranean. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and its Water Expert Group (WEG) also provide a valuable platform for information sharing and the promotion of common objectives and experiences of countries such as Jordan, Morocco and Palestine related to water scarcity, such as building resilience measures to adapt to the shocks of climate change.

4.7. As the Mediterranean and MENA regions’ transboundary waters have often led to disputes, further aggravating the problems caused by climate change and desertification, the EU has the potential to emerge on the international and regional level as a driver of change, and use its existing EU policy instruments to seek effective and efficient solutions in the long-term. Under the framework of NDICI-Global Europe, more than EUR 380 million has been committed by the EU, thus contributing to the Global Gateway on transboundary water management actions, in cooperation with countries, river basin organisations and regional bodies.

⁽¹⁵⁾ <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/water-cooperation-and-peace-finnish-water-way-water-diplomacy-project>

4.8. The European Union, within its ongoing partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on climate and environmental security, is committed to the water-safety link in transboundary cooperation on water management. The 1997 UN Watercourses Convention and the 1992 Water Convention both could be useful guides on transboundary cooperation.

4.9. The Nile, Jordan, Orontes, Tigris-Euphrates and Evros/Maritsa transboundary river basins have attracted global attention due to disputes over the allocation of water for drinking, irrigation and power generation. These disputes have posed challenges to regional peace and stability.

4.10. Transboundary lake basins such as the Dead Sea, Ohrid, Prespa and Scutari have also attracted significant attention due to their role in protecting biodiversity and degradation threats from unsustainable agriculture, illegal fishing and tourism development.

4.11. The Mediterranean and MENA regions host some of the world's most important wetlands, whose protection deserves special attention, with regard to biodiversity as well as illegal fishing and water resources.

4.12. Collaboration between EU Member States sharing rivers, such as Portugal and Spain, Greece and Bulgaria lies below the desired levels.

4.13. Collaboration between EU Member States and EU candidate countries sharing rivers (such as Greece and Albania, and Greece and North Macedonia, Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina), leaves much to be desired. At the same time, there are two good practices that deserve praise: 1) the cooperation between the countries sharing the Dinaric Karst Aquifer System (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro), that allow better national and regional management approaches to this unique freshwater resource, to be developed to address related ecosystems protection and improve water quality (UNESCO IHP 2016). Conservation of ground water flow discharge to the sea maintains valuable ecosystems at the junction of the land and marine environments; 2) the 2002 Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin, the first post-war multilateral framework adopted by countries of the former Yugoslavia, shows how regional cooperation over water can both drive and consolidate piece-building efforts.

4.14. The UfM water policy framework of actions 2030 and its four task forces Water-Energy-food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus, Water-Employment-Migration (WEM) Nexus, Water, Hygiene and sanitation (WASH), and Water and Climate Change Actions (WCCA), developed jointly with different actors of the civil society including Global Water Partnership — Mediterranean and the Inter-Islamic Network on Water Resources Development and Management (INWRDAM), bringing together states from the north and south of the Mediterranean (Italy-Turkey, Greece-Lebanon, Malta-Egypt) and promoting joint water management policies are very welcome, and constitute a bright example for the region and beyond.

Brussels, 21 September 2023.

The President
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