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# Summary of the Information Threat to the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games



**VIGINUM**

Public report

September 2024



According to its mandate set out by the Article 3 of the Decree 2021-922 of July 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, the Service for Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference (VIGINUM) is **in charge of detecting and characterizing the foreign digital interferences**, by collecting and analyzing the online data publicly available on digital platforms and media outlets. This mission includes the protection of major events taking place on national territory, such as key democratic moments (elections, in particular) or large sporting events with a strong international visibility.

As a technical investigation service, **VIGINUM is authorized by the Decree 2021-1587 of December 7<sup>th</sup> 2021 to perform electronic and automatic processing of personal data, in order to support the detection and characterization of foreign digital interference operations**. These operations can be online information manipulation campaigns or information operations with a “direct or indirect involvement of a foreign State or non-state entity”. Characterizing the involvement of a foreign actor is specific to VIGINUM’s operational activities, and should not be confused with the process of attribution, as identifying the responsible actors surpasses VIGINUM’s field of competence.

When it comes to the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games held in France, VIGINUM was in charge of protecting the French-speaking public debate from any foreign digital interference attempt that could:

- Harm France’s image or reputation by denigrating its ability to host, organise or ensure the security of major international competitions;
- Negatively impact the French Economic Interests, by attacking the event stakeholders, sponsors and other French economic actors;
- Generate or amplify disorder in the physical world in order to disrupt the smooth running of events.

To detect these malicious information operations, VIGINUM opened an operation in April 2023 dedicated to protecting the online public debate regarding the 2024 Paris Games, which aimed at monitoring the activity of online ecosystems and influencing networks with known connections with foreign powers, or with their interests. This operational approach is based on an analysis of the *modi operandi*, and not on an analysis of the content.

# I. THE OLYMPIC GAMES: A GLOBAL EVENT, INHERENTLY ATTRACTIVE FOR THE INFORMATION THREAT

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From July 26<sup>th</sup> to September 8<sup>th</sup> 2024, France hosted the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, 100 years after the first Paris Games were launched in July 1924. From an international perspective, the Games were held in a difficult geopolitical context, marked by the persistence of international conflicts. At the national level, they were held in a post-election context, following the European and the early legislative elections.

The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games had record-breaking numbers of TV viewers and online platform visitors, boosted by the Olympics opening ceremony on July 26<sup>th</sup> and the popularity of the Olympic events and venues.<sup>1</sup> Although broadly very positive, this significant number of viewers and spectators also inevitably generated opportunities for malicious operations for foreign actors posing an information threat. The unprecedented engagement on social media created an effective sounding board for foreign information campaigns. Making the most of a fertile breeding ground online, some systems structured and positioned themselves to introduce and/or amplify divisive themes in the public debate on the Paris 2024 Games, for example, on immigration, insecurity, unsanitary conditions, the inclusion of minorities and gender issues.

Information operations detected before and during the Paris 2024 Games and involving foreign actors all highlighted a clear intention to leverage any event or news related to the Games in a planned and opportunistic manner, in order to:

- **Harm France's image or reputation** by denigrating its ability to host, organize or ensure the security of major international competitions;
- **Negatively impact the economic interests**, by attacking event stakeholders, sponsors and other French economic actors;
- **Undermine the universal and democratic values**, while promoting alternative political models among international spectators and viewers;
- **Generate or amplify disorder** in the physical world to disrupt the smooth running of events.

Over the period considered (April 2023 –September 8<sup>th</sup> 2024), VIGINUM identified **43 information operations** targeting the Paris 2024 Games and using various operating modes, which are documented hereinafter. As most of them are opportunistic, VIGINUM also identified two planned and coordinated digital information manipulation campaigns, one of which in summer 2023 was called OLIMPIYA, involving pro-Azerbaijan actors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The American channel *NBC* reported 41.5 million viewers on July 26<sup>th</sup>, nearly twice the viewership observed during the Tokyo Games. *France Télévisions* also reported more than 24 million viewers, the second best rating in its history.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/11/14/des-acteurs-proches-de-l-azerbaïdjan-derriere-une-campagne-de-boycott-des-jo-de-paris\\_6200083\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/11/14/des-acteurs-proches-de-l-azerbaïdjan-derriere-une-campagne-de-boycott-des-jo-de-paris_6200083_3210.html).

## II. ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF THESE OPERATING METHODS ON THE FRENCH-SPEAKING PUBLIC DEBATE

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While the Paris 2024 Games provided many opportunities for foreign threat actors, VIGINUM has noted that the operations identified, for the most part, failed to become sufficiently visible in the French-speaking public debate to produce real effects on the smooth running of events.

Concerning the strategy carried out, most malicious actors tried to target specific national audiences. This strategy aimed at leveraging the cognitive biases of the targeted viewers, by providing them with content to which they will be more receptive and therefore more likely to share. Moreover, the dissemination of a wide range of content with a multi-platform approach illustrates a desire to diversify the channels in order to reach as many viewers as possible, and to “test” the appeal of specific topics on a range of audiences. Lastly, the international dimension of the Paris 2024 Games provided an opportunity for threat actors to take advantage of other linguistic communities, in order to harm France’s image well beyond the French national borders.

The sharing of disinformation content by some French public figures with a large online community proved to be the most important factor in giving visibility to these operations, by enabling them to reach audiences beyond their traditional ecosystem. This is most likely what happened with a video which circulated under a false Hamas flag (see Part III) and not only helped to make the operations more visible, but also created some confusion in the understanding of the situation.

However, in terms of viewership, most operations observed remained in specific ecosystems and did not go beyond the first postings or first influencers, nor manage to penetrate the French-speaking public debate. VIGINUM has also noted that some public initiatives aiming at debunking the identified content as soon as they were published may have helped them gain some sort of visibility<sup>3</sup>, that otherwise they would probably not have reached.

Besides, some operations even seem to leverage this pattern, for example the *Matryoshka* campaign, which directly calls out fact checkers to invite them to debunk their publications, and thus occupy the media space with the aim of amplifying the risk of an information threat.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the choice to reveal an information campaign or operation should be based on a cross-checked analysis of the risk of impact, i.e., the probability that it could move beyond social media communities and spread to the physical world.

In this regard, low visibility or absence of an apparent impact of a one-off operation should not obscure the need to analyze the effects of combined operations over the long term. The massive and regular posting of polarizing narratives or the lasting instrumentalization of specific audiences or online communities can contribute to reinforcing certain lines of fracture or existing vulnerabilities within French society. Therefore, by artificially amplifying a form of permanent protest, even if it is based on real facts, the information threat makes it harder to distinguish between manipulated information and opinion.

However, the relatively low penetration of these operations in the French-speaking digital public debate can also be explained by the considerable efforts put in place by several media outlets and some civil society actors, as well as by the various initiatives led by public actors in France and abroad.

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<sup>3</sup> “To debunk” fake information means showing how it is false or misleading, which means exposing it in doing so.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/matriochka-une-campagne-prorusse-ciblante-les-medias-et-la-communaute-des-fact-checkers>

### III. MAIN OPERATING METHODS OBSERVED BEFORE AND DURING THE PARIS 2024 OLYMPIC GAMES

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#### False flag operations

This operating method consists in conducting a digital influence operation to blame another actor, with the aim of avoiding or, on the contrary, directing potential retaliation. The aim can also be to worsen a situation or get a higher level of engagement. The attacker will then seek to use an adversary's marks of recognition or *modus operandi* in an attempt to sow confusion.

VIGINUM detected the use of this operating method on several occasions, including ahead of the Paris 2024 Games.

In November 2023, *Telegram* channels affiliated to the Russian digital influence ecosystem disseminated a threatening video targeting Israeli athletes by using the codes of the ultra-nationalist Turkish organization, known as the "Grey Wolves", for which no one ever claimed responsibility. Many press articles have been written about this operation, which reflects the strong media's reactivity on information manipulation.<sup>5</sup>

In July 2024, VIGINUM also detected, a few weeks before the opening ceremony, the posting of a video on *X*, *Facebook* and *Telegram*, showing an alleged member of Hamas threatening the Paris 2024 Games and France, accusing it of supporting Israel and denouncing the participation of Israeli athletes in competitions. Although the individual spoke decent Arabic, his speech contained intonations mistakes, suggesting that he was probably not a native language speaker. Amplified by the publication of articles in several African medias which were potentially financially compensated, this operation has been attributed by the *Microsoft Threat Analysis Center* (MTAC) to the Russia-affiliated influence actor know as *Storm-1516*.<sup>6</sup>



Screenshot from the video of the supposed Hamas member

#### Increasing the visibility of action conducted in the physical field.

This operating method consists in using posters and graffiti in public places to generate coordinated and spontaneous posts on online platforms. The aim is to give the impression that actors are mobilizing in the public sphere for a cause.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/j0-2024-derriere-une-video-et-des-tags-menacant-les-athletes-israeliens-une-nouvelle-operation-de-destabilisation-russe-20231118\\_7J4WJB3MKVC3FHFT3ZVAZ2HTV4/](https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/j0-2024-derriere-une-video-et-des-tags-menacant-les-athletes-israeliens-une-nouvelle-operation-de-destabilisation-russe-20231118_7J4WJB3MKVC3FHFT3ZVAZ2HTV4/).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/fake-video-threat-olympic-games-russia-rcna163186>.

For example, on July 26<sup>th</sup> 2024, VIGINUM detected a photo of a bus shelter advertisement in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris which targeted the Israeli Olympic team. This photo was widely reposted, particularly on X, mostly by pro-Palestinian accounts.



*Poster calling for the boycott of the Games on a bus shelter in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris*

VIGINUM also observed an attempt to instrumentalize actions conducted in the physical field particularly by posting photos of graffiti allegedly found on walls in Paris. In November 2023, VIGINUM detected on *Telegram*, *VK*, *Facebook* and *X* several photos of a graffiti of two hands passing a weapon from one to the other above the logos of the 1972 Munich and 2024 Paris Olympic Games.<sup>7</sup> The posting of these photos of graffiti, whose authenticity could not be proven, had been spread by several accounts with inauthentic features affiliated to the *RRN/Doppelgänger* campaign.<sup>8</sup>



*Graffiti supposedly found at 13 rue Buffon, Paris 75015; 750 meters away from the Grande Mosquée de Paris*

<sup>7</sup> During the 1972 Munich Games, 11 Israeli athletes were taken hostage by the Black September Organization and murdered.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/j0-2024-derriere-une-video-et-des-tags-menacant-les-athletes-israeliens-une-nouvelle-operation-de-destabilisation-russe-20231118\\_7J4WJB3MKVC3FHFT3ZVAZ2HTV4/](https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/j0-2024-derriere-une-video-et-des-tags-menacant-les-athletes-israeliens-une-nouvelle-operation-de-destabilisation-russe-20231118_7J4WJB3MKVC3FHFT3ZVAZ2HTV4/).

## Doxxing of athletes

This operating method involves the research of information on people's private lives and then posting it online. In the context of the Paris Games, doxxing mainly entailed accusing athletes of having been found guilty of cheating or committing crimes in order to damage their image and create hostility towards them which could lead to physical incidents.

In the context of the conflict between Hamas and Israel, several Israeli athletes had personal information disclosed and subsequently used to accuse them of war crimes. VIGINUM noted that this operating method was used by the pro-Iranian digital ecosystem to create controversies and a hostile environment for these athletes and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). They accused it of applying double standards between Israeli athletes on the one hand and Belarusian and Russian athletes (competing under a neutral flag) on the other.

## Creation of audiovisual content

### 1. Original content

This operating method involves producing original content (images, audio and video) which is obviously inaccurate or misleading, and then disseminating it across various platforms.

On June 5<sup>th</sup> 2024, VIGINUM detected the dissemination of a video in Mandarin with an anti-Paris Games narrative, stating that the Seine was comparable to the Ganges in India, "full of oil and litter", and that the air in Paris would be too "putrid" for Olympic athletes. The video was made using artificial intelligence (AI) and disseminated on several Chinese streaming platforms.

In another example, on July 30<sup>th</sup> 2024, VIGINUM detected the dissemination of three videos on *Instagram* showing Israeli athletes first dressed in military uniform and then in their Olympic sportswear, before committing crimes.<sup>9</sup> The montage then revealed the identity of three Israeli athletes competing in the Paris Games and portrayed them as war criminals.

### 2. Content spoofing official organizations

This operating method involves creating or manipulating content while spoofing the logo or graphical charter of a media outlet, NGO or institution in order to legitimize fake news and thus mislead Internet users.

On 26<sup>th</sup> July 2024, VIGINUM detected the dissemination, by pro-Iranian accounts, of graphics calling for the boycott of the Israeli Olympic Team, using the logo and graphical charter of the NGO Amnesty International.<sup>10</sup> These graphics were accompanied by AI-generated images which showed Israeli athletes physically attacking Palestinian civilians. Alongside the images was a narrative calling for the boycott of Israel, as well as specific hashtags.

This operating method was also observed by VIGINUM with the pro-Russian *Matryoshka* campaign, which on several occasions targeted the organization of the Paris Games by spoofing legitimate media outlets and institutions.<sup>11</sup> This campaign's operations attempted to spread the narrative that France was incapable of successfully hosting the Games (regarding health, security, material, transport conditions) by targeting various organizing bodies and instrumentalizing the actual level of terrorist threat to the event.

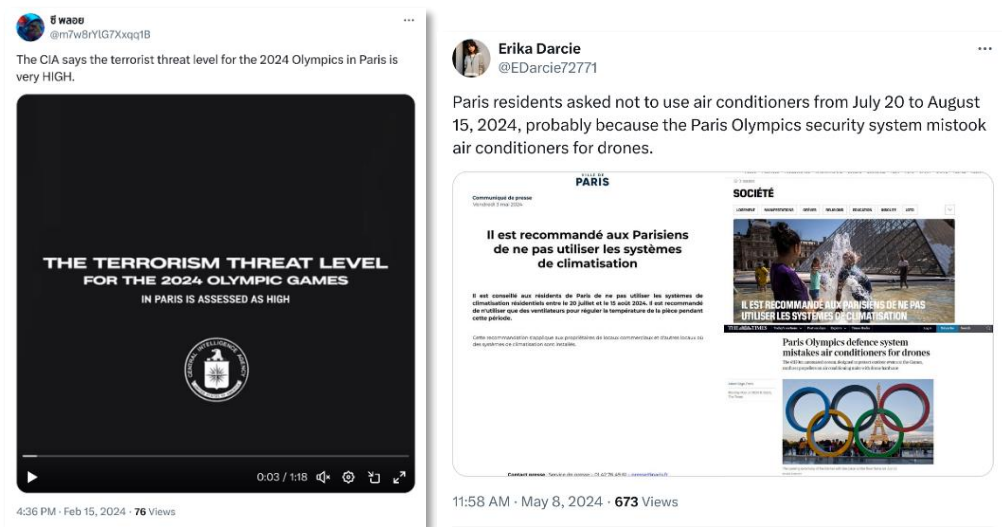
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<sup>9</sup> <http://archive.is/bWPWf>; <http://archive.is/lpO5n>; <http://archive.is/7Aa9E>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://archive.ph/wip/YTCZb>.

<sup>11</sup> *Matryoshka* campaign aims at posting fake contents (reports, graffiti, memes, etc.), which are then shared in the reply section of X posts of the accounts of media outlets, public figures and fact-checking organizations in more than 60 countries. See <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/matriochka-une-campagne-prorusse-ciblante-les-medias-et-la-communaute-des-fact-checkers>.

Several posts spoofed the graphical charter of the French Directorate-General for Internal Security (DGSi) and the CIA, claiming that the terrorist threat was too high to ensure the security of events. Other publications disseminated a fake document from Paris City Hall asking Parisians not to turn on their air conditioning due to the risk of wave emissions which could disrupt the movements of drones securing the Paris Games infrastructures.



Screenshots from Matryoshka posts targeting the Paris Games

## Non-transparent use of influencers

This method consists of using accounts with large audiences, in this case accounts with several thousand subscribers and/or which have a relationship with their community, to extend content dissemination and reach a wider audience.

On 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> July 2024, VIGINUM identified the coordinated dissemination, via influencer accounts on X, of English-language narratives condemning the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony by comparing it to the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing. This tactic was intended to denigrate universal and democratic values while promoting the Chinese model to international audiences. In total, the identified publications had over 7 million views.

Furthermore, between 27<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024, VIGINUM also detected a video featuring a Chinese-speaking foreign influencer with over 2.45 million subscribers which had been disseminated on several social media platforms.<sup>12</sup> The video, in Mandarin, directly criticized the Paris Games and in particular the organization of the Opening Ceremony. In four days, the video garnered over 2 million views, demonstrating the value of using celebrities with a large following to quickly increase content visibility.

## Use of fake accounts

This method consists of using networks of accounts with inauthentic features details, whether bots or trolls, to artificially amplify the dissemination of content and narratives. These accounts can therefore disseminate publications in a coordinated manner, sometimes on a massive scale, in order to reach a huge audience or give a false idea of a trending issue (astroturfing).

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<sup>12</sup> The multi-platform dissemination of content is an operating method in itself. This operation used the following media platforms: Douyin (the Chinese equivalent of TikTok), Bilibili (another Chinese video platform), YouTube, Facebook, Weibo (Chinese equivalent of X) and X (formerly Twitter).



These accounts often have specific features enabling them to be identified as fake, such as a recent creation date, the use of AI and *cypypastas*,<sup>13</sup> low subscriber numbers (or sometimes even none), or a large number of publications in a short time period.

Between 10<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024, on several Chinese platforms, a network of fake accounts disseminated misleading narratives in Mandarin stating that 92% of the Paris Games merchandize and equipment was made in China.<sup>14</sup> Most of the disseminated content was videos and articles extolling the virtues of Chinese manufacturing around the world, and its essential role in making the Paris Games a success.

Between 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> August, VIGINUM also identified the coordinated dissemination by fake X and *Tumblr* accounts of misleading English-language narratives on the 2024 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony. This information campaign sought to polarize the digital public debate around the ceremony by disseminating provocative narratives stemming from allegations by foreign ethnic nationalists and conspiracy theorists. This account ecosystem is very likely affiliated to the pro-Chinese Communist Party influence operation entitled *Spamouflage*,<sup>15</sup> which was characterized in open sources.

## Creation and/or amplification of hashtags

This method consists of creating polarizing hashtags<sup>16</sup> which are then legitimately forwarded by real users or manipulated and spread by fake accounts (*bots* or *trolls*).

Since mid-2023, VIGINUM has observed the creation and amplification of several hashtags targeting the Paris Games or its organizers. For example, *RRN* campaign<sup>17</sup> disseminated on *Facebook* and *X* the *#JOpourris2024* hashtag via several of its accounts, although they garnered little visibility.

In July 2023, pro-Azerbaijan accounts tried to give visibility to several hashtags calling for the boycott of the 2024 Games, such as *#BoycottParis2024* and *#NoParis2024*.

VIGINUM has also detected the dissemination of hashtags which were not artificially spread, aimed at criticizing the participation of athletes from certain countries at the event. For example, the dissemination of *#BloodyOlympics* on *X*, *Facebook* and *Instagram* was used to criticize the sponsors of the event and the IOC's decision to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete under a neutral flag.

## Decontextualizing videos

This method consists of removing a video from its original context in order to use it to mislead audiences. This technique was mainly used within a relatively short time period around the Opening Ceremony, between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024.

Firstly, in the week before the Opening Ceremony, VIGINUM observed the opportunistic instrumentalization by foreign nationalist and identity-based actors, mainly English and Spanish speakers, of several incidents involving successive cases of violence.

These digital actors sought to portray Paris as a dangerous city due to its immigrant communities, in an apparent bid to discourage tourists from attending the Paris Games. To do so, several videos featuring violent incidents were taken out of context in order to feed this misleading narrative.

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<sup>13</sup> A block of text or a graphic which is identically or almost identically copied and pasted, on one or several web platforms, with the aim of making a message more visible.

<sup>14</sup> This misleading narrative draws on the fact that 90% of each Paris 2024 Olympics Plush Mascot is indeed made in China.

<sup>15</sup> [https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika\\_Report\\_Spamouflage\\_Returns.pdf](https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Spamouflage_Returns.pdf) ; <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/04/04/china-ai-influence-elections-mtac-cybersecurity/>.

<sup>16</sup> A *hashtag* is a keyword used on social media to tag a theme in order to make it more visible.

<sup>17</sup> Also known as *Doppelganger*, this campaign has been active since spring 2022 and uses the following methods: the spoofing of legitimate media outlets and institutions via typosquatting of their domain name; the creation of local pseudo-media outlets disseminating pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian content; operating fake network accounts across several platforms in order to disseminate campaign content. see. <https://www.sgdsm.gouv.fr/publications/maj-19062023-rrn-une-campagne-numerique-de-manipulation-de-linformation-complexe-et>.

At the same time as the Opening Ceremony, VIGINUM detected X accounts identifying as Indian nationalists, pro-Trump and pro-Israel showing a montage of three decontextualized videos of Paris with infrastructure and vehicles on fire. This montage, however, had already been shown during urban violence in Nanterre in July 2023, proving the clearly misleading nature of these publications.



*Screenshots from a video montage posted on X*



*Screenshots from a decontextualized video posted on X*

Furthermore, from July 28<sup>th</sup> and following the Opening Ceremony, several ethnic nationalist and ultra-conservative X accounts, once again in English and Spanish, disseminated a decontextualized video showing “thousands of Christians” who had supposedly assembled in France to protest against the Opening Ceremony, which was deemed to be “anti-Christian”. This video, however, was initially shared on August 15<sup>th</sup> 2022 during the Feast of the Assumption.

Finally, earlier this year, VIGINUM also identified the use of this method between May 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> on X and Chinese platforms, by Chinese-speaking accounts which instrumentalized a clip from a press conference held by the deputy spokesperson of the Spanish political party Podemos, in which she asked the Spanish government to boycott any international events involving Israel.

## ABOUT VIGINUM



Created on 13 July 2021 and attached to the General Secretariat for Defence and National Security (SGDSN), France's service for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference (VIGINUM) is intended to protect online public debate which affects France's fundamental interests.

This technical and operational state agency is responsible for monitoring and defining information manipulation campaigns on digital platforms, involving foreign actors with the aim of damaging France and its interests.

[Service for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference | SGDSN](#)

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