

**WHY DO LGBTQ+ ROMA
REMAIN INVISIBLE TO EVERYONE?**

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Abstract

Talking openly about your sexual orientation or identity in Ukraine is always a risk, especially if you are a representative of the Roma community. This paper argues that the general negative attitude of Ukraine towards LGBTQ+ communities have an impact on the Roma community as well. Through describing initiatives such as *Kyiv Pride* and the film *Chacho* this thesis will discuss how community groups are working to change the perception of gays in Ukraine and the Roma community. Since the level of tolerance in Ukraine towards people of homosexual orientation is extremely low, this creates the problem of the invisibility of the community. The well-founded fear of prejudice and discrimination forces many LGBTQ+ people to hide their personal lives. The path of Roma LGBTQ+ can be much more difficult than for a Ukrainian representative of non-normative sexual orientation. In this paper, I want to talk in more detail about why LGBTQ+ Roma people remain invisible to the Roma community, the LGBTQ+ community and to Ukrainian society as a whole. Do they have a chance to create their own community?

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1. Introduction

Talking openly about one's sexual orientation or identity in Ukraine is always a risk. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people and other members of sexual orientation other than heterosexual in Ukraine may have more social, legal, general political problems than heterosexuals or people with a more familiar gender identity in Ukrainian society. According to various sociological data, the LGBTQ+ community is estimated to number from 450 thousand to 1.2-1.5 million people¹. In order to understand the environment in which the Ukrainian LGBTQ + community exists, the historical context of Ukraine as a state colonized by the Soviet Union cannot be ignored. Certain aspects of Ukrainian cultural must also be explained in order to understand how mainstream society perceives non-heterosexual identities. After providing an overview of this historical and social background, I will analyze why LGBTQ+ Roma people remain invisible to the Roma community, the LGBTQ + community and to the Ukrainian society as a whole. The question is whether Roma LGBTQ+ have a chance to create their own society. If so, what problems do they face and how are their voices heard? This paper contends that Ukraine's overall negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ communities have an economic impact since the nation could be richer by UAH 15.5–37.4 billion annually if it were able to present a more open image of itself as a country. By describing initiatives like Kyiv Pride and films, etc. this thesis will discuss how NGO/civic groups have been working toward changing the perception of gays in both Ukraine and its Roma community. Ultimately, this paper concludes that despite the fact that the Roma community is in a difficult situation, it has many problems, it is very conservative, but it must also learn to accept diversity. We cannot demand equality when we ourselves attack the rights of other minorities. Integration is only possible if the values and traditions of the communities are accepted and respected. Only under such conditions will it be safe for the LGBTQ + Roma community to make a name for themselves in Ukrainian society.

2. Overview of mainstream Ukrainian attitudes toward LGBTQ+ communities

2.1. Political and legislative presence of the LGBTQ+

The importance of history is due to the fact that the attitude towards gays and lesbians, which was formed during the Soviet era, is still reflected in modern Ukraine. The Criminal Code of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic prohibited same-sex sexuality. In the USSR, information about homosexuality was extremely limited. Gays were usually portrayed as thugs and sex maniacs, while lesbians were portrayed as mentally ill or retarded². In 1991, the law was revised to protect the right to privacy of Ukrainian citizens. However, same-sex sexual orientation and gender identity remain a taboo topic in Ukraine. This is evidenced by the facts of a constant attack on activists and peaceful LGBTQ+ meetings not

¹ [*"There are up to 1.2 million gays and lesbians in Ukraine"*. Article by *Information agency Unian*, 06.01.06 17:41](#)

² [*Feminists Contest Politics and Philosophy \(Philosophy and Politics\)*, *Peter Lang*, 2005, \(page 197-199\)](#)

only from the part of ultra-radical groups, but also the police that often make raids on gay clubs or other institutions.³

In 2015, Ukraine adopted a national human rights strategy and drew up a five-year action plan to promote LGBTQ+ equality. Despite initially optimistic expectations that *President Zelensky's* government and his *Servant of the People Party* will be more open to LGBTQ+ issues, activists note an almost complete lack of action on key equality issues.⁴ Issues such as the recognition of same-sex marriages and the rights of LGBTQ+ couples to adopt children have not moved from the deadlock. The draft law on combating hate crimes against LGBTQ+, put forward in 2020, has not been approved by the parliamentary committee. Therefore, today same-sex marriages in Ukraine do not have any legal recognition, and same-sex couples are prohibited from adoption (*according to paragraph 211 of the Family Code of Ukraine*) Non-profit, same-sex sexual relations between adults in private are legal in Ukraine, but mainstream social institutions and Ukrainians often describe them negatively, demonstrating their attitudes toward LGBTQ+ in general.

This year Ukraine will celebrate the 30th anniversary of its independence. Many LGBTQ+ people feel the need to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity. Society's attitude to this issue does not seem safe and tolerant. A poll conducted by *Angus Reid Global Monitor* in December 2007 found that 81.3% of Ukrainians surveyed said that homosexual relationships "*will never be acceptable to them*", 13% said that "*sometimes they are acceptable to them*" and 5, 7% "*acceptable*"⁵. According to the results of a poll of the population of Ukraine, the level of tolerance towards people of homosexual orientation remains extremely low. A well-founded fear of prejudice and discrimination forces many members of the community to hide their personal lives. This phenomenon is known as "*cover-up*", and according to research, it still occurs even in countries with a high level of inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. So, this creates a problem of invisibility of the community for others. For example, if a person works in a company and does not identify himself as an LGBTQ+ representative, the most likely explanation is that such people are forced to hide their identity. The fact that LGBTQ+ people do not talk about this side of their identity in the workplace does not mean that they do not exist. The issue is not to encourage employees to share the details of their private lives, but to create a safe environment for LGBTQ+ people, whether or not they want to talk openly about their orientation or identity. It all starts with a clear statement that the company is happy to welcome LGBTQ+ people to the workplace and creates a culture of inclusion. Other measures can be taken, such as working with local LGBTQ+ groups.

While conditions in the LGBTQ+ community are generally somewhat better in Kyiv and other large cities, there are still numerous cases of incitement to hatred and violence against members of the community. The police of Ukraine are notorious for their reluctance to help members of the community⁶, but recently the situation has been gradually changing due to the rapid informational and educational activities of activists. Also, thanks to the emergence of the *Democratic Sokira party* in the political arena of Ukraine, for the first

³ ["The situation of LGBT in Ukraine for the year: betrayal and victory"](#) Yevgeny Solonica. Article by Radio Freedom, 08.06.2021 22:16

⁴ [The Economic Case for LGBT+ Inclusion in Central & Eastern Europe \(CEE\): Hungary, Poland, Romania and Ukraine](#), 2020 (pages 17)

⁵ *Ukrainians Decry Shoplifting, Drunk Driving*, Angus Reid Global Monitor, 2007

⁶ [Written Comments of the European Roma Rights Centre, concerning Ukraine for consideration by the Human Rights Committee at its 129th Session](#), 2020 (page 7)

time, LGBTQ + activists and supporters had the opportunity to run for public office during the 2020 elections with an open identity.

2.2. Religious influence

Most Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholic believers tend to view homosexuality and non-traditional gender roles as signs of immorality and religious crime. Before the first *Equality March* from *Kyiv Pride*, scheduled for May 25, 2013, the *Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate* unanimously adopted a declaration *on the negative attitude to the sin of sodomy (homosexuality), its promotion in society and so-called same-sex marriage*. The head of the church, *Patriarch Filaret*, said that people who support LGBTQ+ rights would be cursed, and *Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk* condemned homosexuality as a sin equivalent to murder.⁷

3. Economic losses from discrimination

The situation with LGBTQ+ rights is better in countries with more successful economies.⁸ The problem of restricting community rights is much more acute in countries with high levels of corruption. Ukraine is a country with a troubled economy among Eastern European countries. Political instability, high levels of corruption, and a protracted hybrid war between Russian-backed separatists, which continues in the Donbass region, where much of Ukraine's industrial production is concentrated, are doing great damage to the local economy⁹. Discrimination also has financial consequences for society. Every year, discrimination against LGBTQ+ costs Ukraine: 15.5-37.4 billion Ukrainian hryvnias (553 million - 1.3 billion US dollars)¹⁰. The most significant indicator of economic losses is calculated in investments, more precisely in their absence. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ affects the perception of the state on the world stage, which, in turn, affects the development of tourism, attracting qualified personnel and more. Due to its poor reputation for discriminating against LGBTQ+ rights, Ukraine is losing opportunities to attract foreign investment. A number of analyzes examining the relationship between LGBTQ+ human rights indicators and economic parameters show that more open countries are also more competitive. With this in mind, businesses have begun to pay more attention to the LGBTQ+ community through the efforts of human rights groups, such as the *Fulcrum UA*, *Corporate Equality*, *Index*, and other programs to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. Companies with a tolerant attitude towards LGBTQ+ outperform their competitors.

Discrimination against LGBTQ+ members are becoming an additional factor in the outflow of qualified professionals who emigrate to countries with a more open society. For years, Ukraine has been losing qualified personnel in favor of its Western European neighbors and other countries. Workers travel en masse to live, work and build their careers

⁷ [The Church of Filaret spoke out against homosexuality: "Everyone who supports and approves the" legalization "of the sin of Sodom falls under anathema". Article by CENSOR.NET, 30.06.13 00:27](#)

⁸ [The Economic Case for LGBT+ Inclusion in Central & Eastern Europe \(CEE\): Hungary, Poland, Romania and Ukraine, 2020 \(pages 71-77\)](#)

⁹ Vox Ukraine ["The Economic Costs of Hybrid Wars: The Case of Ukraine"](#), 30 July 2020

¹⁰ The report was prepared by the organization [Open For Business](#), 2020

in a more open and tolerant society. According to research, the largest outflow of Ukrainian members of the LGBTQ+ community occurs in the United States, Poland, Germany, Canada and the United Kingdom¹¹

4. Role of Roma in LGBTQ+ community in Ukraine

Roma people are considered one of the most oppressed groups in Ukraine. They face difficulties in obtaining identity documents in search of permanent employment, suffer from high levels of poverty, poor living conditions and poor-quality education and health care. Discrimination by government officials and law enforcement officers creates total distrust of Roma in government agencies. However, it should be emphasized that the most important reason for the disadvantage of the Roma is Romaphobia, which often manifests itself in the form of racial discrimination.¹²

People can be discriminated against on several grounds, and if a person is discriminated against on more than one grounds, this is called *multiple discrimination*. For example, if we take a homosexual Roma, he will be discriminated against not only on the basis of ethnicity, but also on the basis of sexual orientation. Therefore, such discrimination is called multiple, since it manifests discrimination based on the hatred of various minorities. In such conditions, the emergence of the Roma LGBTQ+ community is very difficult. Such cases are not unique. Let's take another example: a Roma woman who wants to get a job. The bosses will refuse her because of several stereotypes, firstly, she is a woman, and secondly, she is a Roma, and these stereotypes undermine her ability to work, since according to stereotypes Roma women have many children and therefore she will constantly be on maternity leave. In this example, one can observe how two different forms of discrimination are combined into one, creating an aggravation of the situation for the Roma community, depriving any chances of getting a job. Such identity position is called *intersectional*, meaning that several characteristics act together to give rise to multiple discrimination.¹³

When posing the question of whether "*it is possible to have an LGBTQ+ Roma community in Ukraine?*", I must note what difficult stages are still necessary for LGBTQ+ Roma to go through to create it. Perhaps the main such stage for Roma with non-traditional sexual orientation is to gain visibility for their community.

LGBTQ+ Roma people remain invisible to their community, because the community itself is quite conservative. It shapes the life trajectory of its members in a heterosexist and conservative manner. Since Roma largely exist as a communal community, where your place

¹¹ [The Economic Case for LGBT+ Inclusion in Central & Eastern Europe \(CEE\): Hungary, Poland, Romania and Ukraine](#), 2020 (page 40)

¹² ["Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Ukraine"](#). Report prepared by Equal Rights Trust in partnership with LGBT Human Rights Center "Our World", 2015 (Page 134-135)

¹³ ["Barabaripen Young Roma speak about multiple discrimination"](#) Written by Lucie Fremlova, Mara Georgescu, Gábor Hera, Laura-Greta Marin, Goran Miletic, (page 8-9)

and responsibilities to the community prevail and take precedence over your personal interests and needs, this very much determines the behavior and thinking of a person. The conservative attitudes of the community largely lead to the fact that LGBTQ+ Roma people remain closed. They do not talk about their preferences and practices, which would somehow differ from the usual form of behavior in the Roma community.

For LGBTQ+ communities, Roma people remain invisible, primarily because they are invisible to their community and often to themselves. We also cannot deny a certain share of xenophobia, which is inherent in Ukrainian society and any communities formed according to one or another characteristic. This may lead to a desire to ignore this or that variety, denying it the right to exist.

In modern Roma society, the patriarchal way of life, the so-called traditional family values and norms, and religious morality dominate. Most fellow citizens find it difficult to perceive the diversity and dissimilarity of lifestyles, alternative styles of behavior. The following comment by Sergey Ponamarev, Director of the Roma Program of the International Renaissance Foundation “*You will be the first Roma in Ukraine who is trying to raise a discussion about Gay Roma*” – illustrates how little discourse there is about Roma LGBTQ+.

I heard this comment from Sergey Ponamarev when I asked him to share some academic, and not only, materials that Ukrainian Roma raise issues of the LGBTQ+ community. This comment perfectly demonstrates the taboo nature of the LGBTQ+ topic in the Roma community. For the majority of Roma – gays are fictional, many believe that they have never seen them, and do not associate their existence with the Roma community. In a conversation with Sergey Ponamarev, I learned that about one hundred and seventy Roma public organizations are registered in Ukraine, but only about thirty carry out project activities and are considered “alive”, and only one Roma organization, *Chiricli*, officially supported the rights and publicly collaborated with LGBTQ+ community. This is why providing members of the Roma LGBTQ+ community with a public space where their lives can be shown in a positive way is so essential. The next part of this document will discuss recent initiatives that have been able to demonstrate the existence of a Roma identity in the LGBTQ+ community.

4.1. Roma in Kyiv Pride

The first public collaboration happened in 2019. *The Roma Women's Foundation Chiricli* expressed its support and solidarity with the *Kyiv Pride*. Members of the *Chiricli* team, Julian Kondur and Alona Kazanska joined the event *Presentation of the photo project Baxtarte*¹⁴ dedicated to the art work of a Roma LGBTIQ+ activist Farkas László held within the *Kyiv Pride* week to express solidarity and support to the LGBTIQ+ community as well to discuss the common dots that unite the two communities. Julian Kondur said in his statement:

“Our communities have much more in common than we tend to think. Both communities face stigma in various spheres of life that reduce the ability of Roma

¹⁴ [Event dedicated to the Presentation of the photo project Baxtarte](#), 20.06.2019

and LGBT people to maintain a decent standard of living. We also have common values that respect gender equality and social justice".¹⁵

Although for the Roma minority in Ukraine information about the Roma LGBTQ+ conferences in Western Europe remain invisible, the statement of the *Roma Women's Fund Chiricli* on their official Facebook page, in which they expressed support and solidarity to *Kyiv Pride*, became a real resonant event for the Roma communities of Ukraine, since this kind of open position on LGBTQ+ topics among Roma can be observed extremely rarely. In 2020, on the official *Kyiv Pride* Facebook page, it became known that the *Roma Women's Fund Chiricli* will again take part in the *Kyiv Pride*, but this time as one of the organizers.¹⁶ Roma activist Aleksandra Koryak, activist and alumnus of the *Roma Graduate Preparation Program (RGPP)*, was supposed to represent the *Chiricli Foundation*, as well as the Roma community, as the organizer of the *Kyiv Pride*. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the event did not take place.

4.2. Film Chachó

In 2019, the *Isolation Foundation* and the *Kyiv Pride NGO*, with the support of the *Human Rights Fund*, launched a long-term project *Coming Out of Isolation 2.0* aimed at overcoming discrimination through contemporary art. The project is designed to speak impartially and critically about different, including non-binary, gender identities, to promote the visibility of LGBTQ+ people, their full and equal inclusion in public life. In 2020, a member of the *Coming Out of Isolation 2.0* project, Ukrainian director Vitalii Havura, with the support of the *Roma program of the International Renaissance Foundation*, created the first film in the post-Soviet space that thematizes the connection between Roma and the LGBTQ+ community. The director notes that he became interested in the topic of the life of LGBTQ people in the Roma community in 2019, when he filmed a documentary in one of the Roma settlements in Transcarpathia. He learned a lot of new things about everyday life, traditions, destroyed a lot of stereotypes in himself, but at the same time learned that the Roma community is very homophobic. This is how the idea for the short fiction film *Chachó* came about.¹⁷

"If there is an LGBT person in a Roma family and someone finds out about it, then the whole family is exposed to shame. Such people can be expelled from the community, even subjected to the so-called "Roma court", they could be persecuted, beaten, and in some cases even killed. And I wanted to speak about it"¹⁸ - commented Vitalii for the online edition BIT.UA.

¹⁵ [Post on the official Facebook page of NGO Chiricli](#), 23.06.2019

¹⁶ [Post on the official Facebook page of NGO Kyiv Pride](#), 25.02.2020

¹⁷ ["A FILM ABOUT A ROMA LGBT BOY WAS MADE IN KYIV"](#), *Kyiv Media*, July 6, 2020

¹⁸ ["Artists in quarantine. How the participants of the art project Coming Out of Isolation 2.0 are working now."](#) Polina Limina, *BIT.UA*, 28 April 2020 17:55

As the director stated, *Chachó* “is a story about a Roma guy who gets married, but does it not out of love, but because his parents insisted on it. He is gay, but not ready to open up to others. He is dishonest to himself, dishonest to his family, to his young wife. We observe the story of a person who finds it very difficult to live in a lie, and how this lies harms everyone around.”¹⁹ The purpose of the film is to help to overcome discrimination, xenophobia and prejudice against the LGBTQ community in Ukraine in general and in the Roma community in particular. This film has a rather symbolic title, *Chachó*, which is *honest* in translation from the Roma language.

“I set myself the goal of combining a topic with an adequate story, in which the storytelling itself is interesting. I want to show first of all a story about living relationships between people. Our hero is not perfect. The parents of our heroes, for whom traditions are very important, are neither bad nor good. They are real people who do not understand something. The conflict is present only in the fact that people do not understand and do not know something, and not in the fact that someone is bad in and of itself”²⁰ – the director shared with the online edition *Clutch*.

The project, its participants and the topic were kept secret from the media and the Roma community. The community's reaction was unpredictable, and since there were several film crew members of Roma ethnicity, such measures were taken to preserve the safety of the participants and the filming process in general. When information about the film became available, the team faced rejection from the side of the Roma community. A great number of problems, such as bullying in the social network, threats in phone calls and expulsion from the community, faced the team members with Roma identity. It is interesting to note that the bullying in the social network stopped immediately after the nomination of the film at the *Odessa International Film Festival* - the most prestigious film festival in Ukraine. And all the threats disappeared altogether after the film *Chachó* won the film festival²¹. From this, therefore, we can conclude that the conservative Roma group was not supported by the majority of representatives of the cultural segment and therefore was afraid to continue to publicly demonstrate their homophobic position in relation to the film and its participants.

It should also be noted that despite the rather low indicators of tolerance towards LGBTQ+ in Ukraine, the film did not receive a lot of hate from right-wing groups. The cultural establishment has been much more liberal about diversity in society for centuries, which

¹⁹ “[The film, Chacho, was shot in Kyiv: the courage to be honest](#)” [Lena Feskova](#), [Clutch](#), 06.07.2020

²⁰ “[The film, Chacho, was shot in Kyiv: the courage to be honest](#)” [Lena Feskova](#), [Clutch](#), 06.07.2020

²¹ “[Chernobyl, LGBT and anti-utopian future of Donbass: we tell about OIFF winners](#)” [Vasyl Korchevny](#), [Yabl](#), 28.10.2020

gives us hope and sets an example that people in the arts have the potential to influence groups with a more closed vision and less tolerance for diversity in society.

5. Roma LGBTQ+ community in Ukraine. To be or not to be?

After the victory of *Chachó* at the *Odessa International Film Festival*, a person self-identified as gay and Roma, whose name I cannot share at his request, in a personal message commented on the victory as follows:

"It gives us, Roma gays, hope!"

Despite the xenophobia in Ukrainian society, it is worth noting that in the last couple of years, a discourse about diversity and intersectionality has been rising in the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ community. There is a growing recognition that the LGBTQ+ community is quite diverse and can include various intersections based on disability, ethnicity, and so on. The next step should be for those LGBTQ+ representatives who somehow represent or have a Roma background to step out of the shadows. A good sign is that a few years ago, in 2019, Roma activists were involved for the first time in the LGBTQ+ community as partners and program participants at the annual *Kyiv Pride* equality march thanks to *The Roma Women's Foundation Chiricli*.

Sergey Ponomarev, director of the *Roma program of the International Renaissance Foundation*, in my January interview with him, when I asked about the existence of the Roma LGBTQ+ community in Ukraine, he answered:

"If one looks at the situation as a whole, then there is so far no strategy for the development of the Roma LGBTQ+ community as such in Ukraine. The set of individuals that are present and have been previously listed cannot be called a community yet"

In order for the Roma LGBTQ+ people to come out of the shadows, they, like everyone else, will have to go through a difficult path of making bold statements about themselves. There would be also need for other forms of interaction, for example individualized support programs for victims of violence, which are built on the basis of ethnic and sexual identity. However, development will be impossible for the community without the first step of openness from a group of people who starts talking about their sexual orientation, openly reflecting on the combination of their sexual and ethnic identities.

Based on these examples and facts, we can conclude that a potential Roma LGBTQ+ movement simply cannot survive in present Ukrainian conditions without the support of the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ community. Since Roma are a group that is more discriminated against than LGBTQ+ people, and sometimes the LGBTQ+ community itself discriminates

against Roma, it becomes clear why gays and lesbians with Roma identity continue to prefer to remain in the shadows. Such representatives, because of their intersectional identity may be subject to multiple discrimination, which poses a threat to their existence and life both inside and outside the community.

6. Conclusion

Since 2014, Ukraine has been actively working on bills that will allow the country to integrate into the *European Union*. In this work, I wanted to convey what important part of European values, such as human rights and tolerance towards the Roma and LGBTQ+ community, we are missing. Both communities' acceptance is necessary for the country's full integration into European diplomatic membership. But so far these minorities are united only by the fact that they suffer from the same ultra-radical groups. It is not surprising that LGBTQ+ Roma people remain invisible to society, because the general situation in relation to LGBTQ+ in Ukraine shows that the minority is vulnerable and is constantly subjected to discrimination, and sometimes even a threat to life. I want to see my country more receptive to diversity, which will enable both Roma and LGBTQ+ communities to feel more comfortable, which will have a positive effect on all government structures and institutions. The more democratic Ukraine is, the sooner it will become a full-fledged member of European diplomatic relations.

It is also impossible to close our eyes to the conservatism of the Roma community, which also has to take important, decisive steps towards integration into the Ukrainian community. Despite the fact that the community is in a difficult position, it has many problems, it must also learn to accept diversity. We cannot claim equality when we ourselves are attacking the rights of other minorities. Integration is only possible if the values and traditions of the communities are accepted and respected. This should undoubtedly be a two-way process. Only under such conditions will it be safe for the LGBTQ+ Roma community to declare themselves in the Ukrainian society.

The path of the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ Roma can be much more difficult than for the Ukrainian representative of non-traditional sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Roma activists continue to seek opportunities to express their non-traditional sexual identity. While this is not enough to become visible in society, these steps have already left a noticeable mark thanks to the *Odessa International Film Festival* and the annual *Kiev Pride*, which served as a platform for the future Roma LGBTQ+ community.

Many children dream of superpowers. I remember when I was a child, I dreamed of being able to stop time and rearrange events without being noticed. For Roma from the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ community, invisibility is not a privilege, it is a problem that infringes on their lives, preventing the community from developing. There are still many challenges for LGBTQ+ Roma, the most important of which is to become visible to their own community.

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