Political caricature of Vladimir Putin on the covers of the *NIE* weekly

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is a semiological analysis of the political caricature depicting Vladimir Putin on the covers of Jerzy Urban’s weekly *NIE*. The time period was set from the day the war in Ukraine broke out (February 24, 2022) to the end of August 2023. **Research methods:** The article uses a semiological analysis of four out of seventy-six covers of the opinion-forming weekly. **Results and conclusions:** The caricatural depiction of the President of the Russian Federation was shown in three different motifs: a) a wanted bandit, b) a despotic tyrant and c) a frightened child. Most often the Ukrainian and Russian national colors dominated, representing the parties to the military conflict. **Cognitive value:** The article fills a gap in research on the contemporary satirical press.

**KEYWORDS**
satirical press, political caricature, war in Ukraine, *NIE* weekly, semiological analysis

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022 became the main topic dominating the Polish media that day (Radkowski, 2022). In addition to reporting from shelled and bombed Ukrainian town, an important aspect of the reports was humor, which provided some therapeutical help. One of its manifestations were the satirical covers of the *NIE* weekly.

The topic of political caricature, sometimes interchangeably called satirical drawing is not often discussed in science. However, taking into account the noticeable paucity of research in this field, it is worth mentioning the achievements of the Polish scholar of Russian studies Andrzej de Lazari, which include publications about caricatures and images such as: *Polacy i Rosjanie we wzajemnej karykaturze* (2008), *Europa i Niedźwiedź* (2013) and *Polskie i rosyjskie problemy*...
Political caricature: between humor and reflection

The lack of a unified definition of the term “humor” undoubtedly results from the multiplicity of the term’s meanings. An example of identifying the multiple levels of its understanding can be found, for instance, in *Słownik języka polskiego*, where the dictionary’s editor, Mieczysław Szymczak, lists as many as four meanings of “humor”: (1) the ability to see the funny sides of life; (2) presenting something in an entertaining way; funny, comic scenes, situations and dialogues in literature; (3) a momentary state of mind, good mood; (4) in plural, whims, grimaces, sulks” (Szymczak, 1998, p. 153).

The literature on the subject distinguishes five basic functions of humor. They include the following (Rusek, 2012, pp. 122–123):

- acculturation function (transferring rules and principles of behavior; some family, folk and national traditions e.g. April’s Fool Day);
- educational function (using humor and play techniques in the process of education, especially in its first stages e.g. in pre-school);
- intellectual and creative function (all forms of cognitive and intellect-developing games, e.g. computer strategy games);
– worldview function (forms of contemplative humor, which must be accompanied by wistfulness and deeper reflection);
– mental state support functions (change in cortisol and catecholamine levels, positive effect on the immune system, reduction of tensions, increased level of endorphins in the body producing an analgesic effect).

In turn, caricature, which is the subject of this work, is “a way of presenting a literary character consisting in aggrandizing and exaggerating certain features of his/her appearance or attitude to life for the purpose of ridicule” (Sławiński, 1976, p. 182). Caricature is “one of the privileged instruments of satire” (Sławiński, 1976, p. 182). Jerzy Szwajcer, in his pre-war publication Okiem karykaturzysty (1930) wrote that caricature is “a synthesis of the visible image and the character of a living person or object, expressed artistically in a simple, blunt, original and witty, but above all, flashy and imagination-engaging way” (p. 3). Historically, caricatures appeared in the Middle Ages, but their real popularity came after the invention of printing. Already during Reformation,

“caricature artists wanted to disgust ideological opponent, ridicule his viewpoint, mock his religious beliefs. Thus, the blade of the satire seemingly attacked the Pope, Luther or Calvin, as had been done before, however, in fact, it was not about people but about the values they upheld” (Kakareko, 2017, p. 296).

It is worth noting at this point that the development of new technologies has brought about the phenomenon of Internet memes, which are now a new form of caricature. As photos with verbal commentary, memes allow us to see a new sense and context of the presented visual layer (Bleszyńska, 2017).

In order to present a more complete picture of caricature it is necessary to define the phenomenon of satire. On the pages of Słownik terminów literackich we read that the literary term “satire” means “a literary work ridiculing or stigmatizing the phenomena presented in it – human faults and vices, customs, persons […] worldviews and political orientations” (Sławiński, 1976, p. 395). The basic feature of satire is ridicule by expressing the author’s critical attitude to the object of ridicule. It should be noted that satire is only a negation of reality, a voice of opposition to a specific phenomenon. It should not try to provide positive solutions to the described situations. Being one-sided or subjective by nature, satire “presents the world in a distorted mirror, deformed by comic exaggeration or reduction” (Sławiński, 1976, p. 395). Gilbert Highet, author of The Anatomy of Satyr (1972), stated that satire is not the greatest type of literature, but it is important, challenging and memorable (p. 3). In turn, Ronauld Paulson (1967) wrote that satire imitates, represents, explores and analyzes evil (p. 4) and its duty is to take a moral stand. The author of satire “in a way confides in us because he always informs us about his position” but at the same time “it is difficult to say how sincere he really is and how much he follows political and communicative strategies” (Pasquini, 2012, p. 6).

“[The satirist] establishes a relationship between himself, the audience and the target. He also tries to set the boundaries of a more or less inclusive community of disapproval. The author of the messages is not always able to make it understandable to the recipient. However, compared to other types of communication, in the case of satire, whose basic ingredient is irony, there is an excess of logical and linguistic difficulties that must be kept in mind” (Pasquini, 2012, p. 13).

To sum up this part of the study, it can be said that satire is a reconstruction of reality which is deformed by criticism and moralism (del Bò, 2016), but at the same time, embellished by humor and exaggeration (Bogołębska, 2000). Being a form visual communication, caricature is not
(only) a humorous, quasi-cabaret form of expression, but above all, a message intended to evoke some reflection and conclusions in its recipient, or reader in the case of the press.

**Magazine covers**

Magazine covers are an important and interesting research topic in media studies, although the tradition of their analysis should be seen in bibliological studies of book covers (Szczęśniak, 2011).

The first pages of magazines, or their covers, usually have a similar structure. They contain the title of the magazine, its price, issue number, barcode, announcements of several leading articles and – most importantly – illustrative material in the form of a photo, painting, caricature or infographics. Cover graphics are usually accompanied by a catchy title, intended to interest readers and encourage them to read the magazine (Fras, 1999).

Magazine covers also serve specific functions. Anna Jupowicz-Ginalska (2017b, p. 75), one of the leading researchers on this topic, listed the following:

- information and promotion function,
- sales function,
- relational functions (communication and entertainment),
- ideological function,
- protective function,
- innovative function,
- competitive function.

Analyzing the functions of magazine covers, the researcher concluded that “the covers of print media are of great importance for the activity of their publishers, influencing their image, competitiveness and relations with recipients and advertisers” (2017b, p. 86), although another study she conducted clearly indicated the lack of a strong correlation between the content of the cover and the decision to buy the magazine (2017a).

On the other hand we should keep in mind that covers that shock and violate taboos, are provocative, controversial or upsetting, and therefore cause outrage, disgust, scandal, anger or wrath, remain in memory longer also because they become the basis for numerous intertextual and metadiscursive references (Szkudlarek-Śmiechowicz, 2019, p. 194).

The flashiness of covers, transgression of moral norms and the pursuit of sensation have contributed to the tabloidization of magazines, which is why some covers not only increasingly cause controversies but also shock and disgust recipients. The massification of the media, which resulted in the pursuit of sensation, made tabloidization “an element of shaping the vision of the world” (Hajduk-Nijakowska, 2010, p. 20).

**The NIE weekly**

The subject of the study presented in this work are the covers of the satirical weekly *NIE*. It is worth mentioning that the magazine has already been the topic of several scientific studies. Katarzyna Paroń (2011, 2013), for instance, wrote about a special role of irony and metaphors in Jerzy Urban’s columns published in the magazine. The analyzed weekly continues the tradition of social and political satire, being currently the only press title that can be classified as satirical press.

The literature on the subject sometimes treats the concepts of satirical press and humorous press synonymously. Press researcher Marek Tobera proposed introducing a general term of satirical-humorous press (1984). In *Encyklopedia wiedzy o prasie* we find a definition of satirical press depicting it as
The tradition of the satirical press is quite rich. The publication considered to be its prototype is *Aesop in Europe* from the early 18th century. The first press title representing the satirical segment was the French magazine *La Caricature*, which started to be published in Paris in 1830. In Poland, this type of magazines become popular in the second half of the 18th and the 19th centuries. The magazines worth mentioning include: *Zabawy Przyjemne i Pożytne*, *Wiadomości Brukowe*, *Wanda*, *Motyl*, *Pszonka*, *Czarny Kot* and *Sowizdrza*. During World War II, satirical press played a great role, fighting the German occupier with words and images (the so-called conspiration press). During the communist period, one of the leading satirical magazines was *Szpilki*, published from 1935 to 1994. The authors of *Szpilki* included Julian Tuwim, Jerzy Toepplitz, Jonasz Kofta and Jerzy Urban, who later became the creator and chief editor of the *NIE* weekly, continuing the tradition of satirical press in free Poland.

The first issue of the “weekly daily” *NIE* was published on October 4, 1990, and cost 2,600 zlotys. On its pages, Jerzy Urban, the founder and editor-in-chief of the magazine from the beginning of its operation on the media market, included the following political program of his magazine:

“We are launching *NIE* as our political no. We will mock serious things and rejoice over sad things. Sanctity that is not violated dies of boredom. Let’s hurry to help it. *NIE* is supposed to be bad. In a country where everything is done poorly, producing a good magazine would be a national apostasy. We are infatuated by patriotism and we will express our tribal solidarity by botchery. Poles are offended by everyone and everything. We will give them many new reasons to be offended. People will buy it” (Urban, 1990, p. 1).

After the overthrow of communism and the introduction of capitalism in place of the centrally controlled economy, the media market opened to private ownership. The early 1990s was the time when large media centers such as Polsat of *Gazeta Wyborcza* were created. Jerzy Urban, “the former president of the Radio and Television Committee and spokesmen of the General Wojciech Jaruzelski government, whose name symbolized the lying propaganda of the martial law” (Braun, 2005, p. 137), took advantage of the opportunity to create his own magazine, financed by the success of his autobiography *Alfabet Urbana*.

The weekly *NIE* was created as negation of the new reality in which Poland found itself, which is best evidence by the title of the magazine, which means “no” in English. From the very beginning the magazine was opposed to clerical, Catholic, patriotic and right-wing values. Jerzy Urban’s weekly was the first to use vulgar language as well as sometimes lewd and obscene humor and graphics (Mielczarek, 2007).

The first circulation, right after the beginning of the publishing activity, amounted to about 100,000 copies. The enormous popularity of the magazine resulted in the increase in circulation to 730,000 copies five years later, making *NIE* one of the most important titles in the opinion-forming press segment at that time (Mielczarek, 2007). After 1995, sales of Urban’s magazine gradually decreased.

The modern trend of moving away from the printed press to electronic media gave new life to the press, which “although readied for burial by some, exhibits great vitality” (Mielczarek, 2012, p. 209). The renewed popularity of the weekly *NIE* among Internet users is the result of
the satirical activity of its editors on social media, where they publish memes and short, ironic statements. As the magazine’s journalist and fan page administrator, Michał Marszał writes: “When the death of the weekly NIE, said to be a medium for old, post-communist readers, was predicted last century, it was not expected that a second life awaits us” (Marszał, 2020, p. 1). The reason for the editor’s self-praise was the greatest popularity of the weekly in social media during the presidential elections of 2020. “We overtook the entire competition, from TVN and TVP, through Onet and Wirtualna Polska, to right-wing propaganda tubes published by Sakiewicz or the Karnowski brothers” (Marszał, 2020, p. 1).

The death of Jerzy Urban on October 3, 2022 turned out to be a breakthrough moment for the editorial team of NIE. The departure of the founder and editor-in-chief contributed to personal changes. According to the information published on the Wirtualne Media (2023) website, the deputy editor-in-chief, several journalists, the chief accountant and the editorial director left the team. Only over half a year after Urban’s death, Waldemar Kuchanny became the new editor-in-chief.

Currently the NIE weekly consists of 16 pages and costs 6.66 per issue (a reference to Satan’s apocalyptic number). It is published by the Urma company. The permanent segments of the magazine include: Etyka bezbożna, Trybuna ludzi, Na czarnym lądzie, Móźdżek tygodnia, Wieści z kruchty, Wieści gminne i inne, Wiara czyni czuba, Przygody Jarka Niezdarka (eng. Godless Ethics, Tribune of Men, On Black Land, Brain of the Week, News from the Vestibule, Faith Makes a Fool, Words of a Halfwit, Dialogues of Ladies on the Way to Church, and Adventures of Jarek the Lubber, respectively).

The weekly NIE belongs to the socio-political press segment. Due to once very high circulation and readership level (almost 2.5 million recipients) Jerzy Urban’s magazine played an important role on the media market in Poland (Mielczarek, 2007). Currently, thanks to its humorous activity NIE is one of the most popular profiles of Polish editorial offices on social media.

**Research methodology**

The method used to study the war satire presented on the covers of the weekly NIE was semiological analysis. Simply put, semiotics is “the science of signs: their origin, history, construction, systems, as well as individual and social uses” (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2019, p. 24). The semiological analysis used in this work involved the study of signs understood as “things or phenomena that can replace something else in a person’s mind, carrying meaning” (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2019, p. 23). It can therefore be assumed that semiological analysis is based on the study of signs in order to read, translate and interpret them.

As a qualitative method, semiological analysis was readily adopted by media researchers. It should be noted that in their scholarship review Status teoretyczny nauk o mediach, Marek Jabłonowski and Wojciech Jakubowski (2014) recognized semiological analysis as part of research on media content. Semiotics, being a study of signs, has therefore found its place in the research of media, and particularly its visual part. Here, the signs understood as “things or phenomena that can replace something else in a person’s mind, carrying meaning” (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2019, p. 23) include colors, digits, letters, shadows, hues, gestures, outfits, etc.

The beginning of semiology was set by Roland Barthes, who seeing the increase in visual messages in media communication, advocated the recognition of semiology as the study that would explain visual media messages. As the father of semiology put it: “The development of publicity, of a national press, of radio, of illustrated news, not to speak of the survival of a myriad rites of communication which rule social appearances makes the development of a semiological science more urgent than ever” (Barthes, 2008, p. 243). Barthes believed that the decoding of a
visual message takes place at two levels: denotative and connotative (1985, p. 290). “Denotations of visual content are determined by the iconographic code which assigns visual patterns of image representations to specific linguistic notions” (Chmielecki, 2016, s. 190). On the other hand, “the system of connotations of the image is built by elements that additionally define the characters presented in the image and are read outside the iconographic code” (Chmielecki, 2016, p. 191). Another element added by Barthes to the concept of semiology was myth, construed as “the second order of meaning, a secondary semiological system in relation to everyday language, or the ‘primary language’, which has been emptied by myth from its primary meaning, associated with everyday communication and common thinking” (Gołębiewska, 2016, p. 84).

In the literature on the subject, we can find instances of a synonymous relationship between two scientific terms referring to signs: semiotics and semiology. Outstanding Swiss semiologist Ferdinand de Saussure, having realized the importance of the image in social life, developed the discipline of structural linguistics (semiotics) as a subdiscipline of the study of signs. “He assumed that structural linguistics was part of semiology examining various systems of cultural conventions that give meaning to human activity and thus become signs” (Więcek & Wrona, 2015, p. 20).

In turn, John Fiske, an Australian media expert, proposed a multi-level analysis of media messages, which originally referred mainly to television. According to Fiske, media messages that require a common code between the sender and the recipient can be analyzed at the following levels: 1) coding at the level of reality, 2) coding at the level of representation, 3) technical coding, and 4) ideological coding (Fiske, 1987, 1999).

The subject of semiological analysis are often photographs, paintings, pictures and drawings. The analysis of visual messages constituting media content can be used, for instance, in researching the phenomenon of propaganda, because “semiology is based on examining how individual signs construct meanings” (Ferenc, 2009, p. 12). The paradigm shift, which involved moving away from logocentrism and turning to visual images, resulted in the frequent use of the visual aspect in both satirical works (satirical images, caricatures) and propaganda messages, thus being part of the phenomenon of visual propaganda (Margolin, 1979). Thanks to the easy reception of visual messages, their audience and range of influence continue to increase (Piekot, 2016).

In the present study, the subject of analysis were the covers of the NIE weekly presenting the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, published in the period from the day of the Russian attack on Ukraine (February 24, 2022) to the end of August 2023. Expanding the time span of the study and the resulting increase in research material, which ultimately consisted of 76 issues of the weekly, made it possible to additionally trace the dynamics of interest in Vladimir Putin, reflected on the covers of Jerzy Urban’s magazine.

The analysis of the 76 covers of the magazine revealed four featuring Putin1, which constituted 5% of the entire research corpus. These were the covers of the following issues of NIE: 9 (2022), 10 (2022), 16 (2022) and 17 (2022). Due to a relatively small number of covers showing Putin, the introduction of any typologies of iconographic representations available in the literature of the subject was abandoned.2 The conducted semiological analysis concerned with the

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1 The electronic versions of the covers come from the online portal www.eprasa.pl. The analyzed digitized covers do not differ from their paper versions. The author has press editions in his collection. The examined covers do not contain the signature of the artist, but the editorial footer contains information that the person responsible for graphics and DTP is Włodek Kierus.

2 If the aim of the analysis was to examine the content of the magazine’s covers and identify leading themes, it would be possible to use, for instance, a typology according to three types of iconic representations: 1) a publicly known person, 2) an anonymous figure, 3) a legible sign. This division was used by Ewa
Semiological analysis of covers
The cover of issue 9, published on March 4, 2022 (a week after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine), features a portrait of Vladimir Putin (Fig. 1). The President of the Russian Federation is shown against a red background, with five stars over his head. These five stars represent the five letters of the vulgar Polish verb “jebać”, meaning to “fuck”\(^3\). It should be reminded that, originally, the five stars with additional three arranged in the pattern ***** *** meant “fuck PiS” among Polish Internet users critical of the ruling Law and Justice party. Therefore, the graphics presented below should be read as a call to “fuck Putin.” The red background of Putin’s portrait has a double symbolism. Firstly, the color red is identified with bolshevism and communism, or generally speaking, the former USSR (Nowakowska, 2008, p. 248). Additionally, in Christianity red is the color of martyrdom and blood (Jurek, 2011). It can therefore be said that the author of the portrait calls for the annihilation of Putin, who is bathed in the blood of Ukrainians.

Another analogy that comes to mind when analyzing the cover featuring Putin is a graphic reference to posters with wanted bandits. This motif was particularly popular in the Wild West and often used in western films (the so-called Wanted Dead or Alive posters).

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\(^3\) The slogan “fuck PiS” gained popularity in the fall of 2020, when mass anti-government protests related to the tightening of abortion law began in Poland.
The heroic attitude of the attacked Ukraine, the high morale of Ukrainian soldiers and the guerilla activity of Ukrainian civilians ultimately meant that Kremlin’s “special military operation” did not end in three days, as originally expected. The difficulties in conquering Ukrainian lands are satirically depicted on the cover of NIE No.10 (Fig. 2). It shows Putin (his identity is additionally confirmed by a suit lapel in Russian colors) who is trying to swallow Ukraine, pictured in its national colors and territorial shape. It is worth noting that drops of sweat appear on Putin’s temples, which clearly suggests that the Russian President is trying hard to conquer Ukraine and is exhausted by this effort. This fatigue and effort are also implied by his reddened cheeks. Putin’s appetite for Ukraine is additionally represented by the teeth falling out from his open mouth, which suggests that the invaded country is hard to conquer. This is well reflected in the idiom “a hard nut to crack.” Analyzing the iconic layer, it can be said that Vladimir Putin, so eager to conquer all of Ukraine, encounters its hard resistance, which causes him to feel tired from the effort (drops of sweat) and surprised (bulging eyes, furrowed forehead) (Glass, 2016, p. 155).

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The front graphics of the weekly NIE No. 16, published on April 22, 2022, shows the figure of Vladimir Putin with an outstretched hand and index finger shouting “Faster!” (Russian “bystree”) at a snail and showing it which way to go. The snail, located in the center of the cover, is an embodiment (or personification) of the Russian army. It has the symbol Z on its khaki-colored shell and an exposed barrel. As can be seen in its eyes, the snail is bored and devoid of energy. The author of the picture presented the Russian army in a satirical way, reducing it to the symbol of a snail. It is worth noting that the snail is a symbol of slowness, and the Polish verb “ślimaczyć się” (move at a snail’s pace) has clearly negative connotations (Przybyła, 2011). Therefore, as may be concluded from the analyzed graphics, the Russian army, which is moving at a snail’s pace, is unwilling to listen to further orders from Putin. Ridiculing the Russian Federation and Putin himself shows how difficult the fight against Ukrainians turned out to be.
On the cover of issue 17 of NIE we can see two figures: Jesus and Putin. Jezus, dressed in blue and yellow robes (the national colors of Ukraine), holds in his hands a small, crouched and frightened president of Russia (Fig. 4). The author of the picture refers to religious symbolism and the motif of Christ as a shepherd (Stachowiak, 1975) who cares for his sheep, suggesting that Putin is a sheep that escaped from the flock (“Rejoice with me, for I have found the sheep that was lost” – Luke 15:6). The figure of Putin, reduced in proportions to Jesus, may point to yet another biblical reference. The President of Russia, as a child, is hugged by Christ, which may be an analogy to the evangelical pericope in which Jesus blesses children: “Let the children come to me” (Mk 10:14). Finally, the third interpretation fits into the so-called messianic motif: Ukraine, as a merciful Christ, forgives Putin (which is expressed by the hug).

Summary
Based on the conducted semiological analysis of the covers of the NIE weekly featuring Vladimir Putin from the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, three conclusions can be formulated.

Firstly, the caricatural representation of the President of the Russian Federation was shown in three different motifs: a) a wanted bandit (Fig. 1), b) a despotic tyrant (Figs. 2 and 3) and c) a frightened child (Fig. 4). The dominant colors were the national colors of Ukraine and Russia, which personified the parties of the military conflict. Vladimir Putin’s caricatures feature geopolitical symbols (Putin eating Ukraine), military symbols (Putin shouting at his army) and religious symbols (Putin in the arms of Christ). Interestingly, Putin’s caricatures did not include the well-known metaphors of Russia, frequently discussed by Andrzej de Lazari, such as the bear symbolizing a great and strong Russian Federation (2013).

Secondly, the satirical weekly NIE, like almost the entire world, sided with the invaded Ukraine. The subject of the satirical drawings was the Russian side, not Ukrainian. It can be stated that publishing such visual forms of expression is always intentional, which in turn allows us to assume that authors of political caricatures, by exaggerating features of appearance or life attitudes, consciously support a specific side of an ideological, moral or like in this case, military conflict.

Thirdly, interest in and presence of Vladimir Putin on the covers of the magazine was limited only to the first two months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The analysis of 76 covers allows us to formulate the thesis that the focus on Vladimir Putin was only temporarily and caused by the political situation4. Interestingly, none of the 76 covers published in the analyzed period featured Volodymir Zelensky. Probably a caricatural representation of Zelensky could be perceived as ridiculing the head of the Ukrainian state and thus siding, even unintentionally, with Russia.

Satirical graphics also constitute a type of visual war propaganda because by using war as the topic of satire they became part of the rhetoric of war. It should be noted that satire may be used by both aggressors and victims of assault in order to ridicule, mock or dehumanize political opponents (Vourinen, 2012). It can therefore be said that “the image becomes a kind of weapon” (Kampka, 2011, p. 9)

This article does not exhaust the topic of caricatured magazine covers, but it can be a starting point for further, in-depth studies on satirical press. The direction of further research, both qualitative and quantitative, will be determined by the socio-political situation because political caricature is a graphic, artistic representation of reality.

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4 I am omitting the covers featuring military and war symbols because, due to their specificity, they may be the topic of a separate study. The present study focused exclusively on the caricatures of Vladimir Putin.
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