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Social Expectations towards the Welfare State. The case of Poland — opportunities and risks

Abstract

The objective of the article is to demonstrate the complexity of issues related to the numerous social expectations made of the welfare state and their bilateral and diverse nature, referring to theory and statistical data. Referring to selected solutions already in place and/or currently being implemented within social policy in Poland, in particular, it addresses the opportunities for fulfilling these expectations and the dangers of (not) doing so. Realisation of social expectations brings with it not only specific gains, but also risks when it is not accompanied by active citizenship, free-market mechanisms are weakened, or attachment to social transfers becomes stronger. Furthermore, the selectiveness and ideological nature of awarding them contribute to social divisions and tensions and to distortion of the values that are crucial in social policy. Social security requires the commitment of major resources, long-term and socially determined actions, and usually also their continuation by political opponents. Negotiated and consistently implemented schemes increase social trust and can be evaluated, and their predictability increases citizens' sense of control and security.

Key words: social expectations, welfare state, social needs, Polish social policy

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Introduction

There are many reasons for reflecting on citizens' expectations towards the state, particularly since today they become stronger the more they are fulfilled. In my view, this is especially interesting in terms of the ongoing debate on the populist turn in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the increasing importance of citizen-centric approaches (e.g. Kende & Krekó, 2020; Suteu, 2019; Stanley, 2017; Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2019). Perceived as a source of delegation and exercising of power, social expectations have become an ideological construct in whose production the state apparatus plays the dominant role (cf. Raciborski, 2010). Polish politicians' willingness to invoke it is shown by government announcements and records of parliamentary sessions, in which legislative initiatives are presented as a reaction to the expectations of society (e.g. *Wypowiedzi na posiedzeniach Sejmu*, 2019). An extremely popular and invariably effective rhetorical device among politicians of various persuasions is the assertion that anybody who opposes initiatives with such motivations also opposes the will of the people. According to politicians' statements, therefore, the state responds to social expectations. But who is it that expresses these expectations — after all, society is not a uniform mass — and what exactly are they?

In order to demonstrate the complexity of the issues in question, I will begin by pointing to selected social expectations of the welfare state, referring to theories and to public opinion polls. What “social” means will be expressed by statistical data. I decided on this approach firstly because, while it is impossible to cover the full range of expectations, one can use examples to show their diversity. Secondly, this makes it possible to highlight the fact that (statistically) widely expressed expectations are always accompanied by less common yet equally significant ones. Thirdly, these diverse social expectations are often contradictory — and consequently, satisfying some may restrict the possibility of satisfying others. Next, based on examples, I will discuss the chances of fulfilling the social expectations made of the welfare state, as well as the associated dangers. Satisfying these expectations brings with it not only specific benefits, but also risks if this is not accompanied by active citizenship, free-market mechanisms are weakened and attachment to social transfers is reinforced. Moreover, the selectiveness and ideological nature of the criteria of accepting citizens' demands usually contribute to social divisions and tensions, thereby distorting key values in social policy such as subsidiarity, justice and solidarity.

While focusing on social expectations as a rhetorical weapon and contribution to political actions, I would like to stress that the article concerns not expectations in general, but those towards the state. Moreover, the social expectations invoked by politicians do not necessarily arise on a bottom-up basis, and their source is not always the real needs of particularly social groups and the struggles of their everyday lives. Social expectations in this or any other sense can be disregarded, diminished and overinterpreted, kindled, artificially created and sustained as a result of political rather than social interests. Where social expectations play a role in the political game, this of course makes it possible to satisfy them, but can also cause secondary problems to arise. Taking the highlighted

issues into consideration, the article can provide essential input into the interdisciplinary field of comparative studies of welfare state attitudes (e.g. Andreß & Heien, 2001; Baute et al., 2019; Rosma et al., 2013), in which there is no shortage of references to social expectations as a significant variable (e.g. Jaime-Castillo & Marques-Perales, 2014). Applying my reflections to the actual situation, I propose my own typology and analysis of social expectations as an overlooked or exposed aspect of proposed solutions and implemented reforms within Polish social policy.

Bilaterality and the differentiated nature of expectations — a theoretical approach

Every deliberate action is based on assumptions concerning how the world operates, what can be expected and what should be done as a result (cf. Olson et al., 1996, p. 211). Behind these assumptions lie expectations which, along with knowledge and moods, determine people's behaviours and interpretation of their surroundings. People have expectations of themselves and others, and in forming them they make plans for the future, for which they have specific hopes (*Słownik języka polskiego*, 2002, p. 761; Giełda, 2015, p. 37–38). Expectations therefore constitute a bridge between the past and the future, and the actions one might expect from other people or institutions are identified on the basis of previous experiences (cf. Hilgard, 1968, p. 981). Expectations in this sense have variable meanings, extents and contents. If we extend these general remarks to citizens' expectations of the welfare state, it is important to note that they are bilateral and differentiated. I understand *bilateral expectations* to mean the links between the expecter and the entity which is to fulfil the expectations. On the one hand, people expect specific actions from the state, intervention or the lack thereof, and they also do not always trust it: whether their interests will be taken into account, whether they will be appropriately satisfied and whether the actions undertaken will continue. On the other hand, the officials (politicians) responsible for the action of the state have their expectations towards citizens. For instance, they expect joint responsibility and cooperation (such as consent to new tax burdens or loss of previous privileges), occasional non-interference, and loyalty. They sometimes do not act disinterestedly, and ration trust, awarding it mainly to their supporters.

Social expectations are also differentiated on the basis of: [1] the presumption of their fulfilment; [2] the unjustified but unvarying hope that they will be fulfilled; [3] the assumed way in which they will be fulfilled. On this basis I identify three types of expectations. The first entail the existence of justified presumptions concerning the likelihood of particular events occurring in the future. I propose to call these *anticipatory expectations*. These are based on credibility and trust in the people and/or institutions towards which we have expectations. Representatives of governing parties therefore do not only act on behalf of citizens, but also employ persuasive messages to convince them that election promises are being fulfilled. The second type of expectations is related to human hopes. This means that expectations are also made when those who are assumed to be able

to fulfil them in fact do not do so. I refer to this type of expectation as *wishful*. These are formed in conditions of great uncertainty. Neither current nor past experiences give certainty, and the existence of these expectations is justified by having important as well as unfulfilled needs. An example might be social expectations concerning improvement of the operation of the health service in Poland, unchanged and unsatisfied for many years. The third type of expectations concern anticipated forms of action. Inspired by the classification of Janusz Reykowski (1974, p. 205), I call these *functional*, as they encompass specific and desired forms of activity. They are not about “any” changes in the education system or health service, but about “concrete” solutions. What counts is not what people expect (e.g. shorter queues to specialist doctors), but the way in which these expectations are fulfilled (e.g. without additional financial burdens) — which significantly limits the available range of solutions and makes it difficult to achieve the anticipated results.

The multitude and ambiguity of social expectations — a statistical perspective

The rules of the welfare state specify the range of services on offer to citizens, formulated by political scientists and others in the form of theoretical premises as well as politicians and officials within party programmes and solutions implemented within the framework of national social policies (e.g. Roosma et. al., 2013; *The Law and Justice Party’s Programme...*, 2019). The ways in which we learn about citizens’ expectations of the welfare state, meanwhile, include individual and joint petitions, street protests and demonstrations, strikes, and media statements. Such information also comes from NGO reports and public opinion polls. It is to this final source that I refer in the subsequent part of this article. The question, however, is what these expectations include. In the subject literature, the range of actions of the welfare state is not clearly specified. They encapsulate initiatives aimed at people susceptible to various threats and facing poverty, as well as those addressed to society as a whole, usually in the form of financial provisions for the purposes of insurance and consumption smoothing in the life cycle, the medical system and access to school education. The scope of the welfare state’s activity therefore includes non-social areas that are part of so-called social investments, such as education, healthcare (Bambra, 2007) and housing (Golinowska, 2018). State social activities are thus not only about social protection, but often divided into three categories: education, healthcare and social provisions, including such areas as expenditure on pro-family policy (Sawulski, 2017).

Given the broad range of expectations that citizens form towards the welfare state, I use statistical data to refer to examples, focusing on two more general related circumstances. Firstly, social expectations are often marked by internal contradiction. The actions expected by citizens (e.g. reduction of the retirement age) sometimes clash with their anticipated results (e.g. high retirement pensions). According to the 2018 OECD study *Risks that Matter*, concerning perception of social and economic risk, Poles’ biggest concern is uncertainty over retirement and lack of financial security for their old age

(74%). The premises of the reform implemented in 2013² foresaw that an improvement in the economic situation of future pensioners was potentially to be brought by bringing retirement age for women and men into line and raising it to 67 — a change which had some support, but was introduced against the expectations of the majority of citizens. Some 79% of respondents opposed raising the retirement age for men, and 86% for women (CBOS, 2012). The proposed changes meant loss of privileges, delayed rewards and uncertainty over their receipt in the future. In the context of the social expectations I analysed, this final issue — uncertainty regarding future pension benefits caused, for example, by breaking of the social contract without a referendum — seems particularly important. The same year, the government decided to introduce another unpopular change in the pensions system involving transferring the money accumulated by citizens in Open Pension Funds (OPF) to the Social Insurance Institution. This happened despite criticisms from some economists and citizens made before the change was implemented. A survey showed that some 49% people who were insured in OPFs held a negative view of the government proposal, while just 11% assessed it positively (CBOS, 2013). As the authors of a statement on the research note, “[...] in keeping with the spirit of the 1999 pensions reform, people insured in OPFs treat the contributions transferred to the funds as their own savings for old age, which the state should not have access to. [...] The implemented and planned changes in the pensions system are accompanied by increased fears concerning not only the size of future pensions but also the guarantee that they will be paid out in future” (CBOS, 2013, p. 18). This kind of action, irrespective of the intentions of those implementing the project — increases mistrust in the state and its institutions as well as entities in the pensions market: “Poles do not believe that the government’s actions are guided by the good of future pensioners” (CBOS, 2013, pp. 17–18).

In accordance with their promises from the 2015 election campaign and based on public dissatisfaction, in 2017 the government succeeded in restoring the age at which pension benefits were payable to its lower level, differentiated for men and women. Opinion polls in 2016 showed that most Poles (84%) supported the decision to restore the previous retirement ages, yet only 4% of them approved the associated significant drop in retirement payments compared to earnings (CBOS, 2016). The change was therefore introduced despite failing to alleviate the fears of the majority of citizens concerning the lack of financial security for old age (these concerns were also not allayed by the implementation of Employee Capital Plans³), while disregarding the legal guarantee of

² Act of 11 May 2012 on changes to the law on retirement and pensions from the Social Security Fund and certain other laws (Dz. U. [Journal of Laws] 2012, item 637), entered force on 1 January 2013.

³ A study by the Nationale Nederlanden insurance firm entitled *Pracownicze Plany Kapitałowe oczami Polaków* (Views of Employee Capital Plans among Poles) shows that the biggest advantage of such schemes was seen as the opportunity to pull out and receive a pay-out at any point. The company’s analysts mentioned three reasons for their negative reception: distrust towards the government, the memory of the Open Pension Funds (OPF) scheme and delayed rewards. Fears

equal treatment of citizens in the social insurance system⁴ as well as the government's knowledge that "one in five Poles do not know what social insurance contributions are. A quarter cannot name them [...] and 40% of young people view themselves as ignorant" (*Zielona Linia*, 2018). Not directly, but contrary to the available knowledge on the subject of social ignorance as to how pensions are calculated and what affects their level (*Wiedza i postawy...*, 2016), the decision was made to reduce the retirement age, and this took place in accordance with public expectations — as government websites show (*Kancelaria Sejmu*, 2017; *Wybór Polaków*, 2017).

Secondly, expectations may be characterised by external contradiction. This means that actions meant to address social expectations often take place against the will and despite the overt protests of certain groups and to the acclaim of others. This becomes particularly problematic when the protesters — theoretically and in practice — should implement the proposed solutions, as was the case with teachers in 2019 and sustained announcements that they would continue their strike over education reforms. The justification for these actions, antagonising the community and various social groups, turned out to be the expectations of the majority, and not the numerous opinions of expert teachers, as indicated in a statement issued by the Ministry of National Education: "The implemented education reform is a response to the expectation of the majority of Poles" (*Komunikat MEN*, 2019). But it remains an open question what type of changes this majority wanted in fact. It is worth recalling that after the education reform was introduced, between 1998 and 2007, the opinions on Polish schools improved, with positive evaluations being considerably more common (51%) than negative ones (36%) (CBOS, 2007). Later too, before education reform came into force in 2019, the majority of Poles gave a positive verdict on the level of education in all types of school. Although around a half of respondents deemed the reform to be necessary (52%), just 34% thought that the current education system functioned better than prior to its introduction (CBOS, 2018a). In summary, it seems justified to say that in general, proclamations from the state — in the form of politicians and government experts — regarding fulfilment of social expectations only partially take such expectations into account. Diverse expectations (anticipatory, wishful and functional) of the same and different groups of citizens are pitted against each other, along with various expectations among governing parties.

that the state would take the money from the plans, as with OPF, was the main reason for aversion towards the programme, given by 61% of respondents. Source: <http://fundusz-lokalny.pl/opinie-polakow-o-ppk/> (access: 12 December 2019)

⁴ Council Directive 79/7/EEC of 19 December 1978 on the progressive implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in matters of social security (79/7/EEC). Article 4. The principle of equal treatment means that there shall be no discrimination whatsoever on ground of sex. Source: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/1979/7/oj> (access: 2 September 2019).

Similarly, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland states that nobody may be discriminated against for any reason (art. 32 para. 2), and women and men have equal rights in family, political, social and economic life (art. 33).

Chances of satisfying social expectations

From the range of diverse chances for the welfare state to satisfy social expectations, I will identify two opportunities, which we can call *circumstantial* and *civic*. Circumstantial opportunities are created when various circumstances increasing the probability of fulfilment of expectations coincide — both good economic results for the state and a favourable political situation. The latter generally serves only part of society — people on the so-called *political wave*, the electorate of the governing party, their potential allies, or troublemakers and opponents with strong social support whom political calculation makes it hard to ignore. Selective reactivity of the government to social expectations and the associated social privileges are practices known in Poland from the past, discussed by Janusz Czapiński and Marek Góra (2016), who cite the social unrest of the 1980s which resulted in the introduction of privileges for selected professional groups. In this way, the authorities hoped to “buy” themselves peace from the agitators (and in democratic systems such tactics can “buy” voters) in exchange for benefits which, in the case of pensions, need not be paid (placing the burden on the state budget) immediately. The resultant situation was that various types of privileges permitting earlier economic deactivation became widely available in Poland, although such solutions affect the sense of social justice and solidarity. Indeed, it is worth noting that more than 86% of respondents stated that there should be a uniform retirement system. This was also the preferred solution among the majority of people covered by a separate system, for example 68% of farmers (Czapiński & Góra, 2016, p. 24) — demonstrating that the statistical majority is not always sufficient for the ruling party to ensure fulfilment of social expectations.

From the perspective of the overall population, civic opportunities seem to be more desirable. These include: 1) social activism — moving from the welfare state to welfare society (Rymsza, 2014); 2) strengthening the third sector — support for public social services; 3) education and a flexible approach to fulfilling expectations; 4) social consolidation and the power of collective pressure. While also paying attention to the significance of social activism and the development of the third sector, I shall begin by citing OECD data from 2018 showing that in Polish social policy, it tends to be financial provisions that are expanded, rather than services. It is a challenge to take social expectations into account while improving the quality of health services and education, which are the basis of so-called social investments. Early education, healthcare and social integration are the condition of development of human capital (Golinowska, 2018, p. 144), and an opportunity for meeting new challenges and dealing with the social risks that result from changing work patterns, technological development, transformations to the family model and an ageing population. Non-governmental organisations have major potential in this field. By working on a partner-based and participatory basis, they are more effective in providing help to the weakest people and efficient in representing their interests. Independent NGOs enjoy greater trust than public institutions — 54%, as opposed to just 25% for the government (*Trust...*, 2018).

In discussing the third of the chances, I refer to ambiguous, and even contradictory expectations concerning the question of the financial security in retirement. Education

could help citizens to formulate relevant expectations not only on the basis of concerns, but also the benefits accruing, for example, from extending their economic activity (Czapiński & Góra, 2016, p. 30). What seems most effective is a combination of education with instruments permitting flexibility in retirement age: from the right to an earlier retirement based on the type of work and taking into account the number of years worked, to initiatives to support the activity of people fit to work and interested in continuing to do so in late adulthood (e.g. requalification, flexible working hours, adaptation of workplaces). Owing to a lack of applied, comprehensible and widely available knowledge and failure to provide the support needed by diverse groups of citizens, people are often left with little choice. Without this support, even if legislation allows for such choices, they are barely more than empty legal regulations.

Observing the diversity and scale of social protests over the years, we can euphemistically state that the state does not represent and realise all interests of citizens in a satisfactory way. Bearing in mind the authorities' politically motivated and selective reactivity to social expectations, strikes and social protests therefore provide an opportunity for fulfilling them. Civic opposition and the associated demands are a way of aspiring to a realisation of social expectations that stirs conflict but is an effective method intrinsic to a democratic system. By organising around the issues that are important to their specific community, publicising them, lobbying and seeking allies, citizens can provoke media, political and politicised debates, which often result in negotiations, public declarations, and consequently also legislative changes.

Risks associated with fulfilment of social expectations

Just as a favourable economic and political situation can make satisfying social expectations easier, an unfavourable situation can hinder it. They also become harder to realise as a result of legislative haste and lack of debate on issues of importance for various groups of citizens. Furthermore, stimulating and fulfilling social expectations does not only serve people, but can also cause a number of problems when it is not accompanied by active citizenship, free-market mechanisms are weakened and attachment to social transfers is weakened. For example, this might lead to: [1] weakening of family and decommodification; [2] uncertainty and a sense of losing benefits; [3] dwindling expectations of the state; [4] social divisions and a sense of injustice.

Research conducted between the 1980s and 2018 shows that Poles have had relatively stable expectations regarding guarantees of social security. Citizens expect the state to play a protective role towards them (Raciborski, 2010; OECD, 2018). In recent years in Poland, these expectations have been further stimulated as large sections of society have received direct financial transfers. I will point to three factors which mean that the availability of these transfers does not necessarily translate to increased social security. Firstly, in the case of non-working families, unconditional monetary transfers significantly weaken their economic function, with which the obligation to provide material security to their members is traditionally linked. This function entails the family's responsibility

for suitable education in the value and ethos of work — the source of personal and social prosperity. At the same time, the dominance of direct financial transfers over the development of social services means that the family is their main producer, disregarding the diverse level of knowledge and competence of its members. As a result, although expenditure on family policy is increasing, institutions offering professional social services, which have always been allies of the family, are weakened. Without the necessary funding, these institutions become poorer, and their availability and the quality of the services they offer therefore also suffer (Golinowska, 2018, p. 15). This generates real dangers when difficult situations requiring specialist knowledge appear. Moreover, this kind of social policy tends to go hand in hand with low employment of women, which can sometimes lead to the phenomenon of feminisation of poverty (cf. Tarkowska, 2002). Secondly, broad redistribution of income from the working to the non-working population in the form of unconditional access to social provisions makes people independent from the free market, payment of contributions and working, which in turn consistently leads to decommodification (Golinowska, 2018, p. 136). Social and economic deactivation constitutes a genuine threat to such values as social responsibility and solidarity, which might be expressed through payment of taxes. Thirdly, unconditional and direct funding of support to economically deactivated people, in cases where competences to work are lacking or become obsolete, can result in justifiable concerns about losing these benefits in the future. By offering short-term comfort, they result in “other-directedness” and an uncertain future. As the economic and political situation are uncertain, the continuity of social programmes is also in doubt. This is reflected in public opinion polls. For example, more than half of respondents are worried that the current or next government will not find money to continue the “Family 500 plus” benefits programme⁵ (CBOS, 2016). It is therefore worth underlining that the mere threat that these benefits could be taken away by political opponents is becoming a strong and effective electoral slogan for the government, which awards these benefits as well as proclaiming guarantees that they will be continued (see: *The Law and Justice Party’s Programme: “Welfare State: the Polish Model”*, 2019). This may in turn create the specific category of risk that is loss — in some part — of civil liberties (e.g. economic independence, voting freedoms). Dependence on state transfers combined with a lack of competences essential for independent acquisition of the money needed to support oneself and one’s family can make citizens “hostages” of the authorities, which regulate and/or hand out various benefits as they see fit (cf. Poznaniak, 1998; Titkow, 2014). The fact is that such state actions are not usually perceived as a form of oppression by the citizens collecting the benefits and are not an obvious mechanism of it. In the context of these findings, however, it is justifiable to argue (although this is open to interpretation) that the “[...] state and society have many ways

⁵ This scheme has been in operation since 1 April 2016 (with subsequent amendments) in the form of a monthly financial transfer (child-support benefit) amounting to 500 zloty, for which at present each child up to the age of 18 qualifies, irrespective of the family/guardians’ income (source: <https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/rodzina-500-plus> (access: 25.08.2020)).

in which the private world of the mind can be colonised and ultimately controlled by the values of the oppressor” (Harrison & Boyd, 2003, p. 100).

With the concerns and risks mentioned above comes a deficit in trust of politicians, confirmed by research conducted in 2018 as part of the *Democracy Perception Index* project. Some 63% of Poles said that they did not count in politics, and did not feel they had any influence on the country’s affairs, while 68% thought that the government did not act in their interests (*Democracy...*, 2018). A culture of distrust prevails as a result of the belief that the system – the corrupt officials, the mendacious politicians – cannot be trusted (Szlendak, 2015, p. 337). These circumstances affect social expectations. Trust is connected to credibility, understood as meaning “fulfilling expectations or satisfying obligations towards those who have placed their trust in us” (Sztompka, 2007, p. 99). The trust and credibility of the state determines, on the one hand, citizens’ belief in the chance of fulfilment of their expectations, and on the other, their willingness to support initiatives to realise them. A consequence of lack of trust is therefore lack of expectations towards the state (CBOS, 2018). The people who want state welfare to be less than it is at present are those who do not believe that paying higher taxes, for which the state offers its services, brings positive results. In 2016, 90% of those surveyed said that the money available in the budget is often spent irrationally, and that taxes are too high in comparison to what the state provides to citizens (87%) (CBOS, 2016a). More than half of respondents (54%) in 2018 felt detached from social programmes and thought they would have difficulties accessing benefits if they needed them (OECD, 2018). In a situation in which social expectations are additionally fulfilled on the basis of ideological and loyalty-based criteria, and public programmes are treated as political tools, the sense of injustice increases. This is a source of social divisions and aversions, towards both the government and fellow citizens benefiting from state provisions. This can lead to a crisis of social responsibility, avoidance of obligations to the state, and thus also to other citizens, yet the anticipated effective social welfare system cannot be built on mistrust, social divisions, low taxes and a lack of rudimentary social security (cf. Golinowska, 2018, pp. 136–137).

Conclusion

To summarise the findings made to date, it makes sense to cite the view of Brian M. Barry, according to whom creating welfare should take into account both what people want and what is good for them (cf. Barry, 1965). While this argument seems sensible, it is insufficient to transcend the problem of bilaterality and differentiated social expectations, as well as the political biases involved in meeting them. Overcoming these would certainly provide (increase) an opportunity for accomplishing differentiated social expectations, assuming that the response of the welfare state to social expectations entails discerning new challenges and the associated risks when the old instruments are no longer effective and it is necessary to develop new ones and to coordinate numerous entities operating in various social sectors and at various levels of decision making (cf. Golinowska, 2018, pp. 24–26). Social security requires the commitment of major resources, long-term and

socially determined actions, and usually also their continuation by political opponents. It is also aided by publicly available knowledge on the sources of public financial benefits and the negative consequences of increasing them. Without social and political agreement on the long-term expediency of social transfers, a foundation of the welfare state is destabilised — social solidarity and the sense of justice. Negotiated and consistently implemented schemes certainly increase social trust and can be evaluated, and their predictability increases citizens' sense of control and security. However, what is favourable for citizens is not necessarily favourable from the point of view of political goals. An example might be changes in the pensions and education systems, amended over the years within different parliamentary terms without public negotiations yet accompanied by claims of fulfilment of social (electoral) expectations. These changes radically disturbed the continuity of previous reforms and had tangible social costs — a lack of trust and justified uncertainty among citizens regarding whether the changes currently taking place will continue in future.

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