

## Crimea's Overlooked Instability

It was, perhaps unfortunately, a picture broadcast round the world. Ditching decorum, Ukraine's protesting parliamentarians hurled eggs, set off smoke-belching flares, poured glue in voting machines, and duked it out (literally) within their legislative chamber on April 27, 2010. At issue was the parliament's ratification of a lease extension for Russia's Black Sea Fleet in the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol, Crimea. The lease was due to expire in 2017, but will now (most likely, although nothing is ever set in stone in Ukrainian politics) continue through 2042. In exchange, Ukraine will receive a roughly 30 percent discount on natural gas imports from Russia, worth up to \$40 billion over 10 years.<sup>1</sup> If it works as advertised, Kyiv sold some of its sovereignty for a stronger economy. Given the current economic environment, few dispassionate observers would begrudge Ukraine this singular tradeoff.

The basing extension is unlikely to be reversed, and Crimea has once again receded from the headlines. This is both disappointing and dangerous, because the fate of the Black Sea Fleet is far from the most combustible issue facing Crimea. Crimea is at much greater risk for violence than most people assume, including those in Moscow fettering the lease extension, because of two flawed tenets of conventional wisdom.

The first holds that Russia wants to annex Crimea and is merely waiting for the right opportunity, most likely under the pretense of defending Russian brethren abroad. This would be accurate if it could be done with no consequences. But Russia has seen that overt action in Crimea is a strategic loser, as evidenced by its

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**Russia alone is not the gravest threat; it has seen that overt confrontation in Crimea is a strategic loser.**

failed attempt to assert claim to the sandbar island of Tuzla. This breach of Ukrainian sovereignty received nearly universal condemnation by Ukrainians, who supported the deployment of troops to secure the island. Russia is a bigger beneficiary of the status quo than Kyiv, and has greater incentives to avoid significant changes. The Sevastopol base extension only reinforces this. Furthermore, overt Russian action also risks undermining one of its major foreign policy successes—its effective use of soft power in Crimea. Russia's

deployment of soft and covert power has given it significant control in Crimea at a fraction of the physical and political cost of the so-called frozen conflicts in Transnistria and Georgia. This may prove a tempting template for expanding its influence within its neighbors.

The second tenet, common both inside and outside of Ukraine, is that Russia poses the greatest security threat to Crimea. While Russia's behavior in Crimea undeniably encourages instability, it is only part of the problem. Crimea is far more complex, and at risk of civil conflict, than most recognize. Ethnic tensions, a widening fissure between Islamic and Orthodox Christian populations, disinformation campaigns, and cycles of elite-manipulated instability all threaten to throw Crimea into a downward spiral of civil violence. These issues have festered since Ukraine's independence and are likely to get worse under President Viktor Yanukovich. They are ignored at great peril. The much-hyped fear of overt Russian intervention in Crimea is far more likely to result from these unaddressed issues spiraling out of control than from any deliberate plans coming out of Moscow.



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## Where on Earth is Crimea . . . and Why Does It Matter?

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Roughly the size of the state of Delaware, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea is a peninsula in southern Ukraine extending into the Black Sea. It has significant local governing autonomy according to a local constitution, but is ultimately subject to the Ukrainian constitution and law. Home to approximately 2.5 million people, it is the only area within Ukraine that has an ethnic Russian majority (approximately 60 percent). This percentage is higher in the independently-administered city of Sevastopol, leased home of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Ten to 12 percent of the population is Crimean Tatar, an indigenous ethnic group brutally deported to Central Asia under Stalin during World War II. They were allowed to return beginning in the late 1980s, bringing their Islamic identity with them. The remainder of the population is mostly ethnic Ukrainians; by and large, they identify culturally with the Slavic Russians on the peninsula.

Russian is the predominate language. Russian media dominates, and its attendant propaganda is pervasive. Crimea had been part of the Russian empire since 1783, but was transferred by Nikita Khrushchev to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. The rationale for the transfer is debated, but it clearly made sense from a practical standpoint given the direct land connection and utilities access of Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR (Crimea is not physically connected to Russia). At any rate, since it was internal to the Soviet Union, few attached any particular significance to the move at the time. The 1954 transfer—particularly with regard to Sevastopol—has been contested by some in the Russian parliament and several prominent Russian politicians.<sup>2</sup> However, post-Soviet treaties between Ukraine and Russia clearly state that Russia acknowledges Ukraine's control of Crimea.

Today, as in Soviet times, Crimea is known as a prime tourist destination; as such, coastal land is highly sought for private vacation homes, hotels, and resorts. Repatriating Crimean Tatars seek land for restitution and resettlement. For the last decade and a half, they have grown ever more frustrated with the corrupt land trade in Crimea which has largely excluded them. There is no fully functioning land register, so it is not possible to know with certainty who owns which piece of property. Business and land deals are opaque. Many Tatars have taken to squatting illegally on land plots to claim them, sometimes with success. This naturally pits Tatars against Slavs, a situation exacerbated by the fact that—at least culturally—Crimean Tatars are Muslim and Slavs are Orthodox Christian. These tensions regularly lead to minor clashes, but ultimately elites on both sides pull their constituencies back from the brink.

Crimea's small size belies its importance as a flashpoint for Russia–Ukraine and Russia–NATO relations, for the presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, for

its role as a laboratory for the trial and use of Russian soft power, and because of its sharp ethnic and religious divide between a previously deported indigenous population and the descendants of the Slavs who moved into their vacant homes. It is precisely the interaction of these factors that destabilizes Crimea.

## **Russia Delights in the Status Quo**

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As noted, conventional wisdom holds that Moscow is merely waiting for the right opportunity to annex Crimea. If the move were consequence-free, that would certainly be the case. But any attempt to take over Crimea would carry severe penalties, and Russia knows it. On balance, Russia has greater incentives to maintain the status quo than even Kyiv. Among the benefits of the status quo for Russia: unfettered use of its naval base, formidable sympathies from the local population based on years of soft power, a relatively free economic hand, and a political pressure point against Kyiv and NATO. The disincentives to annexation are more compelling still: a history of failed Crimean separatist movements, demonstrated backlash from mainland Ukrainians to overt Russian action in Crimea, and an (almost) inevitable Western response.

### **Far From Fleeting**

Russia's marquee interest in Crimea is the Black Sea Fleet's base in Sevastopol. By treaty, Russia leases its Black Sea Fleet facilities from Ukraine. Moscow has a relatively free hand in operating the fleet, so even if Sevastopol became Russian territory, not much would change from a practical standpoint.

The presence of the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea is first and foremost a political mission, with the fleet often dismissed by many observers as largely militarily insignificant. While certainly not the most potent of Russia's naval forces, the fleet nonetheless helped handily sink the Georgian Navy in 2008. Russia has publically signaled its intention to augment the fleet's capability. To this end, Russia is negotiating a deal with France to acquire four amphibious assault ships, an intention announced ominously a mere year after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.<sup>3</sup> Further still, the communications and energy pipelines which crisscross the Black and Mediterranean seas will continue to proliferate. A Russian naval presence could sabotage these vital seabed connections. All this is to say that Russian naval power in the region is, and will continue to be, strategically important.

As a military installation, Sevastopol is one of the best naval ports in the region. Its deep harbors and porous rock formations have made it a naval gem for hundreds of years. Neither Russia's Black Sea port of Novorossiysk nor Abkhazia's Ochamchire come close to Sevastopol as a military installation.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, expansions in both ports would correct the over-concentration of

forces in Sevastopol. Russia's move to diversify its basing makes military sense, and in no way signals that Sevastopol is militarily "optional."

The fleet is also important for cultural reasons. Much significance is attached to Crimea in Russian and Soviet military history and nostalgia. Crimean residents hold a tremendous amount of pride about the military glories of yesteryear, albeit many of them glorious defeats. Crimea was an important symbol of the Russian empire, representing its furthest reach to the southwest. While the decay of the fleet is plain to see, this seems to have done little to color perceptions of the past. These feelings might peacefully exist within the Ukrainian state, but the 2008 war in Georgia brought the dangers of this relationship into sharp relief.

Since Georgian forces were attacked with Black Sea Fleet ships, Georgia would have been within its rights to attack Sevastopol. There is no getting around the fact that the return address for Russia's Black Sea Fleet is Ukrainian territory, and this could have disastrous consequences for Ukraine's relationships with its littoral neighbors. Russia's staging attacks from Ukrainian territory could subject Ukraine to attack or pull Ukraine into a conflict. During the war in Georgia, then-Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko threatened (by presidential decree) to deny the return to port of ships involved in the hostilities. This was patently unenforceable and derisively dismissed by Moscow; Yushchenko abandoned the effort. The incident served to highlight how entrenched the fleet is in Sevastopol and how little power Kyiv has over the prerogatives of the Russian navy.

### **Russia's Soft Power Success**

When one thinks of Russia exerting control within its "sphere of interest," it's generally fairly obvious. Think of the frequent Ukrainian gas crises or the frozen conflicts in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. In diplomacy, Russia tends to come across as assertive and bullying, at least according to many of its neighbors. Probably the last thing one thinks of in the Russian toolbox is soft power. But that's exactly what it has been using—to great effect—for years in Crimea. The local population, by and large, is strongly attracted to Russia for its politics, culture, economics, and shared history.

Russia's soft power focuses most intensely on three areas: media, culture, and history. The Russian press and television dominate Crimea, despite attempts by the Ukrainian government to ratchet down exposure. Almost the entire population of Crimea regularly speaks Russian, so it is instinctive to gravitate to Russian film and television. The Black Sea Fleet, businessmen, and NGOs with Russian affinities sponsor a number of local publications and television stations. In addition to attracting Crimeans to a Russian point of view, the media relentlessly advances two dangerous themes: 1) Kyiv is to blame for Crimea's

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socio-economic problems (given the paralysis in Kyiv since the 2005 Orange Revolution, this is not a hard sell); and 2) radical Islam is spreading among Crimean Tatars. Both of these themes reinforce the attractiveness of Russia, which is seen as an oasis of relative stability and security for Slavs.

Russia established a branch of Moscow State University in Sevastopol, and sponsors a number of cultural organizations.<sup>5</sup> At a minimum, it influences several groups of so-called “Russian Cossacks.” These have been variously described to me as boy scouts, paramilitaries, thugs-for-hire, and everything in between. Depending on which of the two dozen or so organizations you are talking about, you can find ones that exhibit these qualities. Their unifying theme is that they celebrate Russian culture and vow to protect it. Alarmingly, when there are violent clashes between Tatars and Slavs, a Russian Cossack group is almost always present. If Moscow ever had the intention to destabilize Crimea with a measure of plausible deniability, these would be its shock troops.

Historically, Sevastopol was one of 12 “Hero” cities in the former Soviet Union, so honored for heroic defensive efforts during World War II. Political speeches and public events, to an inordinate degree, still focus on this history. Even more than distracting from the problems of the present, this constant look backward creates a sense of unity and pride among Slavs in Crimea. At the same time, it reinforces the “us versus them” divide between Tatars and Slavs; despite many Tatars fighting valiantly on the Soviet side, Stalin accused Crimean Tatars of collaborating with the Nazis. He deported their entire community to central Asia in 1944. Some estimate that 40–50 percent of the Tatar population died during the process of deportation and exile.<sup>6</sup>

Russia’s willingness to use soft power to entice sympathies appears to be a significant departure from its generally assertive (and sometimes belligerent) foreign policy. This is not to say that soft power was by design or its first choice, but rather the next thing to try when it became clear that hard power would not work. As Russia takes stock of its foreign policy wins and losses, I believe that the successful tactics used in Crimea may prove an attractive template to be deployed elsewhere. The use of soft power has allowed Russia to both achieve and sustain a status quo that benefits it as much, and likely more, than overt territorial aggregation. And it’s done so at a fraction of the economic and political cost of frozen conflicts.

**Both a Hong Kong and a Trump Card**

Russia and Cyprus (that is to say, Russia and Russia) are consistently top investors in Crimea, with 37 and 11 percent of foreign investment, respectively.<sup>7</sup> And that does not include all of the shadow investments floating in. Land, as Crimea's most attractive asset, enjoys an opacity in ownership and transfer that makes it a currency onto itself. Crimea's former Minister of Tourism estimated that more than three quarters of tourism-related revenues were off the books. In this shadow economy, Russian businessmen are not considered foreign investors, and enjoy the same corrupt access to local authorities as Ukrainian businessmen. As Paul Goble, who served as special adviser on Soviet nationality issues and Baltic affairs to Secretary of State James Baker, phrased it, Crimea functions a bit like a Hong Kong for Russian businesses.<sup>8</sup> It is a trading point for illegal trafficking, and its territory is used to evade taxes and avoid much official scrutiny from both Ukrainian and Russian authorities.

While tracking illicit business is exceedingly difficult, it stands to reason that Crimea is seen as a far more legitimate place to do business than the so-called "frozen conflict" territories. Yet, local governance is weak and corruption is rampant. In this atmosphere, it is difficult for the Ukrainian state to exert control over the Crimean economy, and Russia enjoys levels of market access not too far removed from where it would be if it owned the territory outright.

In dealing with Kyiv, and to some extent NATO, Russia has this Crimean trump card. Moscow can, and does, drum up street protests in short order. The Russian apparatus has shown remarkable responsiveness to Ukraine's prospects for joining NATO; when Ukraine flirts seriously, Crimea comes alive with anti-NATO protests. More frighteningly than street protests, Russia could handily send Crimea into violent chaos if it chose to. It might not be able to control it once it started, but it can certainly foment it. Better still from Russia's standpoint, it can do so while still maintaining plausible deniability (say, through the use of Russian Cossack cultural groups). Russia can play, or threaten to play, this trump card if Kyiv ever gets too far out of line. The effects of instability in Crimea could quite realistically influence Ukrainian elections, cause the collapse of a governing coalition, or scuttle NATO accession negotiations.

**Hard Power Fell on Hard Times**

Beyond the myriad incentives Russia has in preserving the status quo, it also faces pronounced disincentives to overt action in Crimea. The most devastating is the prospect of permanent bad blood between Ukraine and Russia. Russia got a glimpse of this during the 2003 Tuzla Island dispute. Without Ukrainian consent, Russia began building a causeway to the island, which is basically a sandbar in the Kirch strait separating Crimea from mainland Russia. Ukraine took a strong



stand that its territorial integrity had been violated and sent troops to protect the island.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, Ukrainian public opinion—even in the Russian-sympathetic eastern part of Ukraine—was overwhelmingly in support of Ukraine sending troops and asserting its integrity. The clear lesson for Moscow was that overt actions which encroach on Ukraine’s sovereignty risk alienating its important support base in mainland Ukraine.

Another strong disincentive is the likely response of the international community. As evidenced during the war in Georgia, overt Russian action in Crimea would likely wreak havoc on Russian financial markets and foreign

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investment in the country. Russia might also risk provoking economic sanctions if it is seen as an aggressor toward Ukraine, although European reliance on Russian gas would limit this leverage. Whereas Western diplomatic resolve was lacking in the case of the war in Georgia, Ukraine is both closer and of far greater importance to the West. Russia must certainly fear a united diplomatic front from the West, something it has not fully seen since the Cold War.

The prospect of separatism might be attractive to Moscow, except that Russia has already watched it fail in Crimea. The best hope of a viable separatist movement rose and fell on the tenure of Yuriy Meshkov as president of Crimea. In response to his separatist agenda, Kyiv and its domestic intelligence apparatus stepped in and abolished the presidential institution, and Meshkov’s two year tenure, in 1995. This devolved significant authority back to Kyiv. It is not clear to what degree Meshkov was supported by Moscow, but the failure of the separatist regime certainly limited Russia’s options for influence going forward.

The last significant disincentive is perhaps Russia’s own history, and Vladimir Putin has shown a predilection for historical lessons. From the fall of the Soviet Union through the 2008 war in South Ossetia, Russia’s involvement in the so-called frozen conflicts in Transnistria and Georgia showed the world that Russia has an assertive foreign policy and is a force to be reckoned with. But the cost of this support, both in terms of diplomatic and economic capital, has taken a toll on Russia. There are few tangible benefits in the frozen territories beyond using them as smuggling corridors. The costs of confrontation are high, and the Kremlin must be searching for a better way to strengthen its “sphere of influence.” It’s difficult to imagine a Russian appetite for yet another frozen conflict, this time on the territory of Crimea.



Given the tangible benefits of maintaining the status quo, and these substantial disincentives to overt action, it is unlikely Russia will—by design—move to change the current situation in Crimea.

### Europe's Next Religious Fault Line?

While the potential use of military force has dominated discussion about Crimea, internal tensions are actually more likely to be the source of near-term conflict. As Crimean Tatars repatriated from Central Asia beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they sought land to settle on and compensate them for the assets taken when they were deported. The Ukrainian state agrees in principle that this should happen, but in practice the process has been halting and slow. While the Crimean Tatar population's grievances are socio-economic, the Slavic population is focused on the Tatars' Muslim identity, in opposition to their Christian one.<sup>10</sup>

The most striking—and disturbing—aspect of public discourse in Crimea is the notion that radical Islam is spreading among Crimean Tatars. Invariably, Russian-leaning (or simply pro-Slav) politicians during interviews spend a substantial part of the time talking about it, and papers and television are rife with hype about the threat. In fact, there is little evidence that there is an outsized incidence of radicalization, even less than one would expect in a typical pluralist society. There are, of course, a handful of strict Wahhabis.<sup>11</sup> There are even some groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, with radical rhetoric. But there is no indication of violent tendencies, and there has not been any violence carried out specifically in the name of Islam. By rhetoric alone, politicians and the press have created a phantom crisis to drive a wedge between Slavs and Tatars.

The Tatars have seen little progress in terms of land, employment, and opportunity over the last decade and a half; as a result, their frustration has grown.<sup>12</sup> The 2010 election of Viktor Yanukovich has only increased their anger and despair, as few see any hope of their situation improving under the Russia-friendly president.<sup>13</sup> They take as early evidence Yanukovich's appointment of Anatoliy Mogilev as interior minister.<sup>14</sup> Mogilev was responsible for a violent crackdown on Crimean Tatars in 2007 and has been accused by Tatars and others of human rights abuses while heading internal security in Crimea.<sup>15</sup>

Tatar passions have been kept in check largely by the persuasiveness of their leader, Mustafa Jemilev. A veteran of the Crimean Tatar movement, he wields a tremendous amount of moral authority. But he's 67 years old and (from what I've seen) a heavy smoker. Nearly every faction of Crimean Tatars I interviewed talked about succession and how their sub-group had a shot at gaining the leadership role.

The prospects that all Crimean Tatars will refrain from violence dim with each passing day.

While the Crimean Tatars have been remarkably cohesive as an ethnic group thus far, it is not at all clear what a post-Jemilev world will look like. Hitherto nonviolent, the prospects that all Crimean Tatars will refrain from violence dim with each passing day. While not a useful comparison, some delusional Tatars may look to Abkhazia for inspiration on how a small minority can drive out a major ethnic group and “reclaim” a territory they consider their homeland.

### **When Managed Instability Becomes Unmanageable**

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The ability to keep Crimea corrupt, and ripe for elite rent distribution, is dependent on its remaining marginally unstable. Kyiv fears violence and pronounced instability in Crimea, and tolerates local elites so long as they keep the pot from boiling over. The result is small-amplitude cycles of managed instability, driven principally by the Tatar–Slav ethnic and religious cleavage. As long as Crimea remains unstable, improving governance and political accountability will always take a distant second to physical safety in citizens’ minds. And as long as they are distracted by safety concerns, the elites and their business benefactors in Ukraine and Russia can operate with a relatively free hand. The effectiveness of Russia’s soft and covert power is aided tremendously by this instability, so Moscow is a key supporter of the mechanisms of managed instability.

Managed instability is coarsely and crudely maintained, with periodic clashes between Crimean Tatars and Russian Cossacks a routine part of the process. Before these incidents of minor violence get out of hand, however, elites pull their constituencies back from the brink or riot police use tear gas and force to separate the factions.<sup>16</sup> Tensions remain high because they are constantly reinforced by rhetoric and media reports which hype suspicions between ethnic groups.

This is possible because there are few objective facts in Crimea, and generally no reliable sources of information. This absence of reliable facts spans from land ownership to employment and state support. Because there are so many lies floating around in the free press and from the mouths of politicians, it is nearly impossible for anyone to say anything with certainty. And that is precisely why people can argue so vociferously—there are almost no accepted facts upon which to ground the debate. Each side quotes their ethnic press sources. The absence of reliable and verifiable information is a key ingredient to maintaining the “us versus them” mentality that divides the Crimean population.

Propaganda, absence of facts, and periodic clashes are central to maintaining managed instability. However, there is no immediate way to undo the damage these crude measures are visiting upon the fabric of Crimean society. If, one day, the elites are unable to pull their constituencies back from the brink, there will be no way to change mentalities forged by two decades of propaganda. How can

newspapers and politicians turn around and say that they've been exaggerating Tatar radicalism or inventing statistics? These manipulations are unidirectional, and neither Kyiv nor Moscow has the ability to reverse their effects in response to escalating violence.

Despite its small size, civil violence in Crimea has profound implications for Europe, Russia specifically, and the West generally. Although in practice Crimean Tatars are largely secular Muslims, civil violence in Crimea would inevitably result in Muslim Tatars fighting Christian Slavs. A peninsula of ethno-religious conflict jutting into the heart of the Black Sea would certainly have spillover and cascading effects, and violence would likely fuel radicalization. If terrorism or organized asymmetric warfare follows, this would lead to a bloody and protracted conflict.

One frightening, but nonetheless plausible, scenario stemming from civil conflict in Crimea is that any violence on the peninsula would give Russia pretense to station additional troops in Sevastopol to protect its base and personnel. The high percentage of ethnic Russians in Sevastopol would also seek Russian protection. If violence escalated and Kyiv could not control it, Russia might fan out into other parts of Crimea in order to protect ethnic Russians from "ethnic cleansing" at the hands of Muslim Tatars. Turkey, home to a large Crimean Tatar population and sympathetic to their plight in Crimea, would certainly bristle at Russian violence visited upon Muslim Tatars, further internationalizing the conflict. If Russia acted in Crimea without Ukrainian consent, relations between the countries would be deeply damaged, and Europe might suffer yet another natural gas shutoff if Russian gas ceased to transit Ukraine. At best, this scenario ends in an uneasy stalemate and protracted negotiations. Even then, a return to violence would be far more likely given a recent history of conflict.

### **Whither Crimea? Crimea Withers**

The internal, ethno-religious crisis facing Crimea is far greater than the debate over the future basing of the Black Sea Fleet. Now more than any time in the last half decade, Crimea is at risk for unintended civil conflict. A number of factors undergird this risk—a lack of any sustained attention to underlying internal tensions, an aging Crimean Tatar leader with unclear succession prospects, and a new president and interior minister seen to usher in the dimmest prospects for improvement in Tatar conditions since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Couple

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these underlying conditions with the managed ethno-religious instability maintained by Crimean elites (and supported by Russia), and the situation risks becoming unmanageable because of the crude ways in which the population is manipulated.

In order to stabilize Crimea, we must look beyond the conventional wisdom. Russia has significant rationale to maintain the status quo and avoid attempts to annex Crimea; it also is a major driver of instability in Crimea. But the conventional wisdom assumes Russia is the greatest security risk as well. Focusing on the Russian bugbear obscures the real danger of ethnic violence. The much-hyped fear of overt Russian action in Crimea may very well come about, but it won't be by Russian design. Instead it will be because ethnic violence spirals out of control, and Russia no longer has the option of maintaining the status quo.

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