

## Perception of Farmers on EC Recommendations for Romania's CAP Strategic Plan

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**Please cite this paper as:**

Chesnoiu, I.A., 2021. Perception of Farmers on EC Recommendations for Romania's CAP Strategic Plan. In: R. Pamfilie, V. Dinu, L. Tăchiciu, D. Pleșea, C. Vasiliu eds. 2021. *7th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*. Foggia, Italy, 3-5 June 2021. Bucharest: ASE, pp. 862-870 DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2021/07/108

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### Abstract

This article analyses the EC recommendations on Romania's agriculture through the perspective of the perception of farmers. The analysis is based on a qualitative study based on the response to 12 key statements that we have structured from the Commission Report on Romania's Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan. These statements, contained in a questionnaire, were administered to two samples by respondents. Independent farmers and farmer's entrepreneurs enrolled in associations (producer organizations or producer groups) with farms between 15-30 ha and independent farmers and farmers entrepreneurs enrolled in associations (producer organizations or producer groups) with farms between 100-300 ha.

It has been chosen as an indicator of structuring, the area cultivated, taking into account the fact that the land is divided into many properties. During the study it was analyzed the correspondence between the Commission's recommendations and their perceived opportunity by respondents. In other words, it aimed to see to what extent the perception of farmers' recommendations of certain recommendations is positive and considered necessary by them. It has been also researched, through comparative analysis, the perceptions of the two categories of respondents to see what the common perceptions of recommendations are and what are the perceptions different from them. The results show that there are different perceptions in the groups of respondents that we sampled in the research. Respondents with farms between 15-30 ha consider in a greater proportion the vast majority of claims submitted to the research. Moreover, the overall average score in this category was 8.77, a score that clearly shows that respondents consider the relevant recommendations. On the other hand, respondents of large farm entrepreneurs had an overall average score of 5.88, which shows that these respondents consider to a lesser extent that these recommendations are relevant. They are moving towards issues that bring a greater profit for business in the future, while the first category is moving towards issues that secure and protect the business in the future.

**Keywords:** farmers, agriculture, Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan, producer groups, short supply chain.

**DOI:** [10.24818/BASIQ/2021/07/108](https://doi.org/10.24818/BASIQ/2021/07/108)

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### Introduction

*The foundation of the European agri-food strategy – from farm to consumer through the short supply chain*

A macro statistical diagnosis of Romanian agriculture and Romanian countryside at the level of 2021 highlights important aspects that allow us to understand the logic and specificity of our country's agriculture in relation to the Member States of the Union. As Wegener (2011) said in "Administering the Common Agricultural Policy in Bulgaria and Romania: obstacles to accountability and administrative capacity" that to improve the delivery of services in new member states such as Bulgaria and Romania, the CAP should pay greater attention to the specific conditions of transition

countries, such as their high share of smallholders. It should be determined whether some responsibilities could be devolved to lower administration levels, e.g. by decentralizing decision-making authorities. Moreover, integrated agricultural offices should be established to house front office agencies in the same buildings, a more comprehensive and tailored system of human resource management should be developed, and the outreach of farmers' associations should be further advanced and facilitated.

The European Union's philosophy on agriculture is to generate a common agricultural policy beyond the diversity of the existing rural organizational culture at EU level. The current common agricultural policy that will guide the actions of the European Commission and the European Parliament is the 'Farm to Fork' strategy in translation, from farm to consumer. Launched in April 2020, the strategy is an ambitious move capable of ensuring the Union's food security by improving agricultural practices and by drawing up a new agri-food policy based on the short supply chain or the full supply chain. The Commission's 'Farm-to-Consumer' strategy advocates more plant-based nutrition and a higher degree of animal welfare. The EC in its recommendations shows that our country can play an active role in the new European strategy: "Farmers in Romania can further expand fruit and vegetable production, focus on quality, including livestock production, with a lower environmental and climate footprint and a much higher degree of animal welfare than the EU average.

As Berti (2016) said in „Competitiveness of Small Farms and Innovative Food Supply Chains: The Role of Food Hubs in Creating Sustainable Regional and Local Food Systems” the response to the multiple—economic, environmental and social—crises of the conventional agri-food system in the last two decades, rural development practices that embody alternatives to the industrial mode of food production and distribution have emerged, namely “re-territorialisation” or “re-localization” of the food supply chains or networks, into “short circuits” often referred as short food supply chains or alternative agri-food networks

Short supply chains of various products mean the sale from a producer to a consumer through as few intermediate levels as possible. Although it has a relatively short and strategic history, it is a successful one in most EU countries. This success can also be argued by the fact that the current European strategy in the field of agriculture is based on the short supply chain. In 2011, the Committee of the Regions promoted the idea of these local schemes as an opportunity to harness local potential and a way to improve the image of lesser-known regions or communities.

Subsequently, the European Commission through its policies focused on the promotion of agricultural products, with the Union having a culinary heritage of great diversity to be harnessed.

The short chain mechanism offers a multitude of facilities that will be analyzed including in relation to the Romanian specifics of these local food systems, characterized by the fact that both production and processing and marketing and consumption take place in a small geographical area.

The purpose of short supply chains shall focus, inter alia, on:

- facilitating interaction between producers and consumers by making them face-to-face, the consumer being able to verify the provenance of the products;
- promoting trust between partners; diversify or increase production; may enter other markets, with consumers guaranteeing producers;
- rapid targeting of the product from the manufacturer to the consumer with concrete indication of intermediaries;
- ensuring a higher quality of products, with consumers being able to check the production process along the way.
- strengthening the local food market, both in terms of product diversity and quantity and the logistical space required – direct sales stalls or outdoor markets;
- the creation of new jobs in agriculture, food production and related sectors;

- reducing the distances on which food is transported – a fundamental indicator of the short chain with multiple economic, environmental, social effects;
- increasing social cohesion and community spirit by promoting local, authentic, traditional, original, seasonal, sustainable products.

Local food production has always been a part of the specifics of rural areas, but it has been steadily increasing in all 28 Member States of the European Union in recent times. Consumer demand for 'local' products with a safe provenance, together with the need of producers to add value to the production and marketing of their agricultural goods, has led to the development of a diverse range of local food networks and short supply chains. Thus, each local initiative has evolved according to the area concerned, the products brought to the market, and the consumers it is addressed to them.

Short supply chains have behind them, as I have shown, a local philosophy, specific to a well-defined area or a region. As such, the measures by which this mechanism can develop take these aspects into account. Among the solutions that central and local authorities may consider are: promoting policies/schemes to help/access funds for producers – measure 16 – cooperation, sub measure 16.4, 16.4a (via AFIR), measures to strengthen local food markets – through local authorities; measures for the development of direct selling stalls; measures for the creation of outdoor fly-mobile markets.

At the time when this concept was being penciled in, 2011, it was considered to be an instrument that would mark the future of European agriculture. Almost 10 years later, April 2020, the Union proposes an agri-food strategy based on the short supply chain. Before making a brief analysis of it, necessary for this article, some macrosocial statistical data that customize Romanian agriculture are necessary to try to understand why the "farm to fork" strategy becomes so important for Romania.

The strategy proposed by the Union is not coincidental, as the mechanism of the short supply chain, which underpins it, is important for Europe. Let us not forget that at European level, 65% of farms have less than 5 ha. In Romania the share is much higher – 92%. As Cecilia Alexandri, Lucian Luca (2012) said in "The Role of Small Farms in Romania and Their Future in the Face of Challenges of the CAP Post 2013" small-sized farms have a significant share in Romania's agriculture, as a result of the specificity of land restitution to former owners in the early 1990s. Although the total number of agricultural holdings in Romania was down by almost half a million in the last decade, from 4.48 million according to the 2002 census to 3.85 million according to the 2010 census, it remains one of the highest in the EU countries and reveals the social, subsistence character of a large part of agricultural holdings. As an average of the years 2007-2010, out of the 4 million holdings, only about one million were eligible for direct payments (those larger than one hectare. There are elements of considering a household as farm. Probably in the EU even on these areas we talk about farms because, beyond the fact that in them the members of a family work up to the third degree – the century, what sets them apart from the peasant households in Romania is the fact that economically they manage to make the most efficient use of the products. Romanian households are subsistence or semi-subsistence. There's one other important point.

The average per farm in Romania, taking into account the division of the land is 3,4 ha, in the Union the average exceeds 16 ha. Or a 16-ha farm has another efficiency, coupled with technology and the short supply chain system, which is much more developed in the Union. The agricultural middle class in Europe is approaching this area and an SO economic index exceeding EUR 15000-20000. There is much discussion with the classification of farms in small, medium or large. The small farm can climb up to 25 ha, depending on the object of activity and the technologies used. The organic farming that is being talked about today, implicitly the targets by 2030, i.e. 25% of the land, are targeting this kind of farm and it is expected that small farms will be financially or fiscally helped to a much greater extent than large farms.

The Commission's recommendations show that more than two thirds of Romania's territory is considered rural and 53% of the population lived in rural areas in 2019.

Although declining, rural territories and rural populations in Romania are among the highest in the EU. In 2019, the rural population decreased by more than 12% compared to 2010. Rural areas are characterized by depopulation, poverty and an ageing population.

In the period 2010-2019, only the category of rural population over the age of 64 increased (by 9.4 %), while the other two categories (< 15 years and 15-64 years) decreased by 13 % and 18% respectively (the decrease was slightly higher for women in the 15-64 age category (87 years)). While in 2010 net rural migration was around -10 000 inhabitants, it exceeded 60 000 inhabitants in 2018, thus reflecting the trend of depopulation of rural areas.

The increase in agricultural productivity and the migration process have led to a reduction in the population working in agriculture from 30.4% in 2010 to 22.2% in 2017. In 2016, 44.9% of the agricultural workforce was women and 34% of farm managers were women, which exceeded the EU average of 28%. In agriculture, day laborers are used, apart from full-time workers. Between 2011 and 2016, the number of day laborers increased from 170.5 thousand to 803.6 thousand people. Their share of the total labour force increased from 1.2% in 2011 to 6.7% in 2016. 80 % of day work is carried out in agriculture (including vineyards, orchards and livestock farming), forestry and fishing. This sector usually employs people with a lower level of education, who sometimes combine seasonal work abroad with casual work in Romania.

The results clearly indicate that agrarian Romania is of contrasts. 40% of the land is owned by small farms, over 790,000, of which 600,000 under 5 ha and 40% of the land is owned by large farms 0.56%, over 300 ha. 20 % of the land is owned by medium farms, over 1700 with areas between 30 and 300 ha.

### **Farm to Fork strategy and promoting the interests of European family farming**

The Farm to Fork strategy promoted by the Union is a new holistic approach to how Europeans value food sustainability. It is an effort to improve, in addition to food, lifestyle, health and the environment. Creating a favorable agri-food environment that facilitates the choice of a healthy and sustainable diet will benefit consumer health and quality of life and reduce health costs to society. People are paying more and more attention to what they eat. They want healthy, fresh, natural and produced food as close to them as possible. Calls for shorter supply chains have intensified and are the basis of this strategy. Food production, processing, retail, packaging and transport make a major contribution to air, soil and water pollution and GHG emissions and has a profound impact on biodiversity, and the Union is increasingly paying attention to this. Food systems remain one of the key factors in climate change and environmental degradation. There is an urgent need to reduce dependence on pesticides and antimicrobials, reduce excess fertilization, increase organic farming, improve animal welfare and reverse biodiversity loss.

The transition to sustainable food systems is also a huge economic opportunity. Citizens' expectations are evolving and leading to significant changes in the food market. The transition to sustainability is a 'first opportunity' for all actors in the food chain. It is clear that the transition will not be achieved without a change in people's diets and in their eating behavior.

Food waste is a major problem in Romania. The main sources of waste are: consumers (50%), producers/processors (44%) and the retail sector (6 %)118. Statistics indicate 5 million tones of food waste each year, representing between one and a half of the total quantity of food for human consumption produced in a year, i.e. around 250 kg/resident119 source (above the EU average of 179 kg/inhabitant).

Although food waste after the farm gate is well addressed in the recently adopted waste legislation, insufficient attention is paid to food waste and waste occurring at the level of primary production and in the early stages of the supply chain. This problem could be addressed through the implementation of the national food waste prevention program provided for in Article 29(2)a of the Waste Framework Directive 2008/98/EC.

The EU's objectives aim to reduce the environmental and climate footprint of the EU's food system and strengthen its resilience in order to lead to a global transition to competitive sustainability from farm to consumer and to exploit new opportunities:

- the production, transport, distribution, marketing and consumption of foodstuffs must have a neutral or positive impact on the environment;



- contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation to its impact;
- protecting the health of land, soil, water, air, plants and animals, stopping the destruction of biodiversity;
- ensuring food security and public health – ensuring that everyone has access to sufficient, nutritious, sustainable food that meets high standards of safety and quality;
- preserving the accessibility of food while generating fairer economic returns in the supply chain;
- promoting fair trade in the short supply chain creating new business opportunities;
- ensuring the integrity of the single market, safety and health at work.

The new reality proposed by the Commission encourages the traditional small and medium European farm. The efficiency of the short supply chain will be based on this reality. Without disregarding large farms, the Commission insists that the new food lifestyle will be linked to communities, traditions, promoting the step-by-step re-enjoyment of local charm and organic farming. From this point of view the EC considers that:

- Direct payments to farmers will be reduced from EUR 60 000 and capped for payments above EUR 100 000 per farm.
- Small and medium farms will receive more support per hectare.
- Countries will have to reserve at least 2% of their allocation for direct payments to support young farmers in their installation. This support will be complemented by financial support for rural development and various measures to facilitate access to and transfer of land.
- Direct payments will continue to be an essential part of the policy, ensuring stability and predictability for farmers.
- Priority will be given to supporting small and medium-sized farms, which are the majority of the EU's agricultural sector, and to aid to young farmers.
- The Commission remains true to its commitment to a fairer distribution of direct payments between Member States through external convergence.

In conclusion, the strategy promotes 5 key strategic objectives:

1. Ensuring sustainable food production

This includes efforts to: strengthen the efforts of farmers and fishermen to combat climate change, protect the environment and conserve biodiversity; significantly reduce the use and dependence on chemical pesticides, fertilizers and antibiotics; further develop organic farming; continue to support the livelihoods of farmers and fishermen in transition.

2. Stimulating sustainable food processing and sustainable downstream practices

This includes efforts to: influence consumer choices regarding diet; review marketing standards; establish nutritional profiles; improve food packaging.

3. Promoting sustainable food consumption

This includes efforts to: reverse the tendency to increase the incidence of overweight and obesity at EU level; strengthen consumers' capacity for action by better labelling of food; establish mandatory minimum criteria for sustainable public procurement.

4. Reducing food loss and waste

This includes efforts to: reduce food losses in the supply chain; improve the recovery of nutrients and secondary raw materials; strengthen the bioeconomy, waste management and renewable energy.

5. Combating food fraud in the supply chain

This includes efforts to: improve traceability and food alerts.

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**Perception of farmers on EC recommendations for Romania's CAP strategic plan – scientific study**

According to European experts, the quality of life in rural areas in Romania is much lower than in urban areas. Road infrastructure is poor (only 19% of rural roads being upgraded); living conditions are poor (50% of rural households have indoor bathrooms and 47% of rural households have indoor toilets), and basic services are low (only 7% of nurseries and kindergartens are located in rural areas). The area covered by local development strategies increased in the current programming period compared to the previous one, covering 92 % of the eligible area and 86 % of the eligible population. The total budget allocated to LEADER is around EUR 636 million. 31 % of the projects financed under LEADER are investments in the improvement and development of rural infrastructure and services, followed by investments in non-agricultural activities.

The new common agricultural policy can be of real help to our country. Focusing on the protection of small and medium-sized farms, on organic farming and on a fairer distribution of direct payments to farmers can be important support points. The Commission's recommendations, as they arrived in Bucharest, the analysis of European documents on the new agricultural policy, the analysis of transitional aid schemes, the prolonged discussions with specialists in the field led me to the construction of 12 affirmative sentences describing the new European CAP and the recommendations to the Bucharest authorities. These statements correspond to important structural problems in the logic of the new European agricultural strategy. These statements are:

1. Protection and aid of small farms with development potential through direct payments or other aid (fixed amount payments for small farmers).
2. Reducing the vulnerability of farmers' incomes to external factors, including climate change by supporting sustainable agricultural management practices (sowed directly in stubble, strip work, especially on slopes, crop rotation using forage legume crops); the use of risk management tools; investment in new technologies; planting forests and the creation of forested areas (including agroforestry belts and woody landscape elements), especially in the plain.
3. Support the diversity of agricultural production by supporting farmers to focus on high value-added product markets and increase protein crop production, to create new value chains and optimize trade opportunities.
4. Capping direct payments at EUR 100,000 per farm.
5. Improving the position of farmers within the value chain, in particular by supporting the establishment of producer organizations.
6. Improving nutrient management, soil protection and water management by supporting appropriate agricultural practices, longer and more diversified rotation fertilization techniques, .agroecological practices of investments in water management systems.
7. Contributing to the objective of the EU Green Pact with regard to agricultural landscape elements by maintaining the presence of landscape elements and their introduction where they are lacking, improving the conservation status of agricultural and forest habitats, and fully respecting biodiversity-friendly ecological principles.
8. Promote organic farming through appropriate incentives to maintain and convert to it.
9. Reduced use of pesticides due to their risk, implementation of integrated pest management.
- 10.Reducing the economic and social gap between urban and rural areas, reducing poverty in some rural areas, slowing the depopulation of rural areas through investments in rural infrastructure.
11. Facility for the installation of young farmers and support the development of enterprises through access to finance and land.
12. Promoting short supply chains and combating artificial intermediate levels.

### **Objectives and sample of the scientific study**

Through the study - The perception of farmers on EC recommendations for Romania's CAP strategic plan, we have looked at how EC recommendations are considered desirable by farmers.

Objective 1 – the extent to which European analyses are realistic and valid in relation to the perceived situation of farmers.

Objective 2 – the extent to which recommendations are beneficial for Romanian agriculture.

Objective 3 – the extent to which there may be large differences between the recommendations made in relation to the real needs of Romanian agriculture.

As a qualitative study, we did not question the representativeness of the sample that we will question. We have built a sanction consisting of two categories of respondents.

First, independent farmers and farmers entrepreneurs enrolled in associations (producer organizations or producer groups) with farms between 15-30 ha. (25 respondents)

Secondly, independent farmers and farmers entrepreneurs enrolled in associations (producer organizations or producer groups) with farms between 100-300 ha. (25 respondents).

I did not take into account the indicator of economic profitability, SO, because I was interested in the context of the exaggerated division of land, classes above the small farm but below the average farm and classes specific to the average farm.

I presented the affirmative sentences in the form of a questionnaire and asked the respondents to respond on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means totally irrelevant for Romanian agriculture and 10 totally relevant for Romanian agriculture.

### **Data processing and analysis of results**

The processing of the 50 questionnaires and the analysis of the data were highlighted the following:

- the highest average score was 9.80 and the lowest was 5.04 for respondents with farms between 15 and 30 ha and for respondents with farms between 100 and 300 ha, 9.52, the highest, and 1.2, the lowest,

- for a number of statements in the questionnaire the average scores were close to what denotes a convergence of objectives

- to a series of statements in the questionnaire, the average scores recorded were of great differences, which shows differences of opinion on certain structural problems.

For respondents with farms between 15 and 30 ha, the highest average scores were obtained in order as follows:

- improving the position of farmers within the value chain, in particular by supporting the establishment of producer organizations – 9,80;

- improving nutrient management, soil protection and water management by supporting appropriate agricultural practices, longer and more diversified rotation fertilization techniques, agroecological practices of investments in water management systems – 9,80;

- promoting short supply chains and combating artificial intermediate levels – 9.72;

- reducing the vulnerability of farmers' incomes to external factors, including climate change by supporting sustainable agricultural management practices (sowed directly in stubble, strip work, especially on slopes, crop rotation using forage legume crops); the use of risk management tools; investment in new technologies; planting of forests and the creation of forested areas (including agroforestry belts and woody landscape elements), in particular in the plain – 9.52.

It follows from these answers that farmers in this category consider very relevant aspects related to the continuation of the establishment of producer organizations, a phenomenon constantly in recent

years, strengthening the position of farmers in the value chain so that it no longer sells products for derisory amounts and can have a say in relation to beneficiaries. Respondents are interested in short supply chains, seeing mechanisms in them that can allow them to capitalize on their wares as close as possible to the place of production, minimizing costs. Farmers agree with the practices of modern agriculture both in terms of nutrient management, soil protection and water management and in terms of reducing vulnerabilities to external factors that cannot be controlled by them.

The lowest average scores obtained by respondents relate to:

- protection and aid of small farms with development potential through direct payments or other aid (fixed amount payments for small farmers) – 8.48;
- capping direct payments per EUR 100,000 per farm – 8.44;
- reduced use of pesticides due to their risk, implementation of integrated pest management – 8.00
- contributing to the objective of the EU Green Pact with regard to agricultural landscape elements by maintaining the presence of landscape elements and their introduction where they are lacking, improving the conservation status of agricultural and forest habitats, fully respecting biodiversity-friendly ecological principles – 5.04.

Respondents do not consider relevant agricultural landscape elements and improvement of the conservation status of agricultural and forest habitats. The other scores, even if they are low compared to the others, still show the involvement of the respondents and the fact that overall, I consider these aspects relevant, including protection and help for small farms. The explanation is logical because the new surfaces between 15-30 ha will be formed through producer organizations. It is necessary for small farms to be helped so that in the future they can associate.

## **Conclusions**

Following the processing and analysis of the data from the qualitative scientific study carried out within the article we can detach some interesting things. First, there are different perceptions in the groups of respondents that we sampled in research – the farmers respondents with areas between 15-30 ha and the surveys farmers with areas between 100-300 ha.

Secondly, the respondent with farms between 15-30 ha considers in a greater proportion the vast majority of claims submitted to the research. Moreover, the overall average score in this category was 8.77, a score that clearly shows the fact that the respondents consider the recommendations relevant. On the other hand, the respondents of large farms had an overall average score of 5.88, which shows that these respondents consider to a lesser extent that these recommendations are relevant.

In terms of comparative analysis of scores, respondents have the highest average scores on aspects related to the continuation of the establishment of producer organizations, a constant phenomenon in recent years, strengthening the position of farmers in the value chain so that it no longer sells products for derisory amounts and can have a say in relation to beneficiaries. Respondents are interested in short supply chains, seeing mechanisms in them that can allow them to capitalize on their wares as close as possible to the place of production, minimizing costs. Farmers agree with the practices of modern agriculture both in terms of nutrient management, soil protection and water management and in terms of reducing vulnerabilities to external factors that cannot be controlled by them.

Respondents do not consider relevant agricultural landscape elements and improvement of the conservation status of agricultural and forest habitats. The other scores, even if they are low compared to the others, still show the involvement of the respondents and the fact that overall, I consider these aspects relevant, including protection and help for small farms. The explanation is logical because the new surfaces between 15-30 ha will be formed through producer organizations. It is desirable that small farms be helped so that in the future they can associate in order to be able to work larger areas.



On the other hand, large farmers consider relevant problems related to the security and development of their businesses. They are interested in promoting short supply chains and combating speculation because they believe that this way, they can have the supply market close to production and can use it complementary in relation to the large contracts they have. Supporting the diversity of agricultural production and finding value-added markets for optimizing commercial opportunities is another relevant assertion. Reducing vulnerabilities to external factors, especially water management, is another claim considered true.

Not relevant to large farmers are the specific problems of small farmers that they no longer consider relevant. The reduced use of pesticides and integrated pest management is once again an irrelevant aspect. This is probably due to the fact that there are still problems with the use of certain pesticides. In the EU there is no uniform picture of the types of pesticides that can be used and it is possible that large farmers consider themselves wronged. The claim that is considered most irrelevant is that related to the capping of direct payments, which somehow logically takes into account the amounts of money that large farmers collect. The Commission's recommendations already divide into two Romanian farmers. Large farmers consider that many recommendations are irrelevant to their interests. On the other hand, respondents with medium farms consider the recommendations are relevant for Romanian agriculture.

**Acknowledgements:**

*This paper was co-financed by The Bucharest University of Economic Studies during the PhD program.*

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