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# RECOVERY BEYOND INFRASTRUCTURE: INSTITUTIONS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF UKRAINE'S RECONSTRUCTION<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

**Purpose** | The purpose of this article is to examine post-conflict reconstruction through an institutional political economy perspective, with particular attention to the role of institutions in shaping recovery trajectories under conditions of deep uncertainty. Using Ukraine's reconstruction as a central reference point, the article seeks to identify which institutional arrangements are most conducive to balancing efficiency, legitimacy, and long-term resilience in post-conflict environments.

**Research method** | The study adopts a conceptual and comparative research approach. It draws on insights from institutional economics, evolutionary political economy, and historical institutionalism, combined with a structured review of comparative post-conflict and post-disaster reconstruction experiences. The analysis integrates theoretical reasoning with evidence from selected international case studies and policy-oriented sources.

**Results** | The analysis demonstrates that reconstruction outcomes depend rather on the institutional frameworks governing coordination, implementation, and accountability than on the scale or speed of rebuilding. Comparative evidence indicates that recovery is most resilient when central coordination is combined with credible local implementation, transparency mechanisms are embedded in routine administrative practice, and partnerships between the state, the market, and civil society operate within clear and enforceable rules. Conversely, donor-driven or

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parallel governance arrangements tend to undermine domestic ownership and institutional sustainability.

**Originality/value/implications/recommendations** | The article frames post-conflict reconstruction as an institutional governance challenge rather than a purely technical task. It recommends that Ukraine's reconstruction strategy prioritize strong central coordination of planning and financing, combined with decentralized implementation at the local level, embedded transparency mechanisms, and clear accountability for the use of donor funds.

**Keywords:** post-conflict reconstruction, institutions, governance, political economy, Ukraine, EU accession

**JEL classification:** O17, P26, D72, F55

## 1. Introduction

Post-conflict reconstruction is often approached as a technical and financial challenge yet experience repeatedly shows that recovery trajectories are shaped above all by the institutional arrangements that govern rebuilding. Experience from past conflicts suggests that recovery outcomes are shaped not only by the availability of financial resources, but also by the institutional arrangements that govern how these resources are allocated, implemented, and monitored. In environments marked by uncertainty, weakened trust, and disrupted governance structures, institutions play a decisive role in coordinating actors, constraining opportunistic behavior, and restoring the legitimacy of public authority. Reconstruction is therefore best understood as a fundamentally institutional process, in which political, legal, and administrative structures shape the trajectory of economic recovery.

For the purposes of this article, the term “conflict” is used in a broad sense to denote organized and sustained political violence involving state and/or non-state actors, leading to systemic disruption of political, economic, and social structures (see Uppsala Conflict Data Program definitions; Pettersson, Öberg [2020]). War is understood as a specific, high-intensity form of armed conflict characterized by large-scale destruction, territorial contestation, and

the mobilization of state resources. In this perspective, the Russian invasion of Ukraine constitutes a full-scale interstate war with profound institutional consequences. The notion of “post-conflict” is employed here as an analytical category rather than a temporal marker. It refers to a phase in which reconstruction and institutional reconfiguration begin under conditions of persistent uncertainty and overlapping military, political, and economic pressures, often before hostilities have fully ceased. The type and intensity of conflict shape reconstruction strategies by influencing the depth of institutional disruption, coordination demands, and risks of fragmentation, thereby reinforcing the central role of institutional design in recovery trajectories.

Ukraine’s reconstruction brings all above issues into sharp focus. The scale of destruction, the persistence of active hostilities, and the parallel process of European Union accession create a recovery context characterized by exceptionally high stakes and deep uncertainty. At the same time, Ukraine enters this period with institutional constraints that predate the war, including uneven rule of law, persistent corruption, and limited administrative capacity. These conditions increase the risk that reconstruction efforts may reproduce patterns of fragmentation and elite capture observed in other post-conflict settings. Yet the war has also disrupted pre-2022 institutional equilibria and intensified societal expectations for reform, creating a rare window of opportunity in which institutional change may become politically and socially feasible.

Against this background, this article examines the political economy of Ukraine’s reconstruction through an institutional lens. Drawing on institutional economics, evolutionary political economy, and comparative post-conflict experience, it conceptualizes reconstruction as a transformative and path-shaping process rather than a purely restorative one. The central argument is that reconstruction outcomes will depend less on the speed or scale of rebuilding than on the early embedding of adaptive, transparent, and accountable institutional governance frameworks. In this context, the article argues that the EU accession process can serve as an external anchor for such frameworks, provided that it complements rather than substitutes domestic institutional ownership and capacity-building.

## 2. The scale of destruction and constraints on recovery

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in unprecedented levels of physical destruction, affecting nearly all sectors of the economy. Recent joint assessments by international financial institutions estimate that potential reconstruction and recovery needs could exceed USD 500 billion over the next decade, a figure that far surpasses Ukraine's pre-war annual GDP [World Bank, 2025, p. 3; UNDP, 2025]. These estimates, however, are necessarily contingent on the duration, intensity, and eventual outcome of the war, as well as on the post-war geopolitical settlement and Ukraine's future political and territorial configuration. Direct damage to housing, transport infrastructure, energy systems, and industrial assets is currently assessed at more than USD 170 billion, with additional losses arising from disrupted production, broken supply chains, and environmental degradation [UNDP, 2025, p. 5]. The burden of destruction is also highly uneven spatially, with eastern and southern regions experiencing particularly severe damage alongside the erosion of local governance capacity and public service provision.

Despite substantial international commitments and preparatory initiatives, large-scale reconstruction financing remains prospective rather than fully deployable under ongoing conflict conditions. Multilateral frameworks such as Ukraine FIRST are primarily designed to support project preparation, institutional coordination, and future investment readiness, rather than comprehensive reconstruction implementation [European Investment Bank, 2025]. Even under optimistic assumptions, significant financing gaps are expected to persist, particularly for priority recovery projects that may need to be initiated before a formal end to hostilities. For 2025 alone, the estimated funding shortfall for priority recovery needs is projected at around USD 10 billion [European Investment Bank, 2025]. At the same time, prolonged warfare places sustained pressure on administrative and institutional capacity, limiting the state's ability to scale up absorption mechanisms. This implies that risks related to delays, inefficiencies, and governance failures should be understood not as evidence of mismanagement (which is also possible though), but as structural constraints inherent to reconstruction planning under conditions of ongoing conflict and extreme uncertainty [World Bank, 2004a].

Beyond physical destruction, the war has caused severe and potentially persistent human capital losses, constituting a major constraint on Ukraine's recovery. Military and civilian casualties, war-related disabilities, and large-scale forced migration have disproportionately affected the working-age population, reducing labor supply and altering the economy's demographic structure [Piechowska, 2024]. Forced displacement – both internal and external – has further intensified these effects, with skilled workers and professionals over-represented among those who left the country, thereby weakening the country's reconstruction capacity [World Bank, 2025]. These institutional constraints are also highlighted in analyses by Ukrainian research institutions, which point to persistent weaknesses in administrative capacity, public procurement, and anti-corruption enforcement as key risks for reconstruction [Transparency International Ukraine, 2024, pp. 12– 13].

At the same time, educational disruption and internal displacement undermine long-term productivity. School closures, damaged educational infrastructure, and interrupted higher education have generated significant learning losses and skill mismatches, whose economic effects are likely to persist well beyond the immediate post-war period [UNDP, 2010]. Internal displacement fragments labor markets by breaking local networks and institutional ties, leading to deskilling and underemployment in safer regions, while war-affected areas face acute shortages of technical and managerial expertise precisely when reconstruction demands are the highest [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2025].

Human capital losses are not merely an additional cost of war, but they significantly intensify reconstruction challenges. A reduced and fragmented labor force constrains the state's ability to plan, implement, and monitor reconstruction projects, while also weakening the effectiveness of institutional reforms. Shortages of skilled civil servants, technical experts, and project managers – combined with declining trust in public institutions and disrupted social networks – undermine both formal governance structures and informal coordination mechanisms. As a result, the risks of inefficiencies, delays, and rent-seeking in the allocation of reconstruction funds increase, particularly when physical rebuilding proceeds without parallel investment in human capital recovery [Collier, 2009].

### 3. Institutions and post-conflict reconstruction: a theoretical framework

Institutions play a decisive role in shaping recovery after systemic shocks by structuring incentives, reducing uncertainty, and enabling coordination among economic and political actors. Post-conflict recovery therefore extends far beyond rebuilding roads and bridges and depends fundamentally on restoring the functionality and legitimacy of political, legal, economic, and social institutions. A broad body of empirical research demonstrates that reconstruction outcomes depend less on the volume of resources mobilized than on the quality of institutions governing their allocation and use [Addison, Murshed, 2005; World Bank, 1998; Rodrik, 1999].

From an institutional economics perspective, sustainable recovery requires the re-establishment of several core institutional prerequisites. These include the protection of property rights and enforcement of contracts, the rule of law and an independent judiciary, civilian control over military and police structures, sufficient administrative capacity, and mechanisms of transparency and participation [World Bank, 2004b]. Together, these elements condition private investment, labor market recovery, and public trust. Where institutional rebuilding lags behind physical reconstruction, recovery tends to be uneven, fragile, and vulnerable to reversal [Addison, Murshed, 2005].

A central debate in the political economy of post-conflict reconstruction concerns the balance between endogenous institutional development and external imposition of rules, regulations, and norms. While external actors often provide indispensable financing and coordination, externally imposed institutional designs frequently suffer from limited legitimacy and weak local embeddedness. As Coyne [2008] argues, institutional transplantation may generate formal compliance without substantive behavioral change, particularly in societies emerging from conflict where trust in authority is already fragile. Endogenous institutional development, by contrast, emphasizes local ownership, gradual adaptation, and learning-by-doing, increasing the likelihood of compliance and stability, albeit with continued vulnerability to elite capture in weak accountability environments [Collier, 2009; Besley, Persson, 2011].

However, even where institution-building is recognized as central to recovery, post-conflict environments are characterized by systematic institutional risks. Large-scale reconstruction inflows, though indispensable, create strong incentives for corruption and rent-seeking when oversight and rule-of-law institutions are weak [Cheng, Zaum, 2013]. Emergency procedures and fast-track procurement may accelerate reconstruction in the short term, but they also weaken checks and balances, allowing rent-seeking equilibria to emerge and persist beyond the reconstruction phase [Collier, 2009].

These risks are often reinforced by tensions between external donors and domestic authorities over institutional control. Externally imposed safeguards and governance templates may fragment governance structures and weaken domestic ownership, producing dual systems in which formal compliance coexists with informal practices and limited administrative learning [Coyne, 2008; Pritchett et al., 2013].

Post-conflict reconstruction often exposes institutional voids, particularly at the local level, where destruction of administrative infrastructure, loss of personnel, and weak legal enforcement constrain implementation capacity. In such contexts, informal governance arrangements may fill coordination gaps, but they frequently entrench non-transparent practices and elite control [North, 1990; de Waal, 2015]. These dynamics are compounded by legitimacy deficits: institutions perceived as externally imposed or disconnected from local needs struggle to generate compliance and collective action, increasing the risk of renewed instability [Collier et al., 2008].

Taken together, corruption, donor–state tensions, institutional voids, and legitimacy deficits can generate a post-conflict fragility trap, in which weak institutions enable rent-seeking, erode trust, and discourage productive investment. Avoiding this outcome requires reconstruction strategies that prioritize institutional resilience, anti-corruption mechanisms, and accountable governance, rather than focusing narrowly on physical rebuilding. From this perspective, institutional design during reconstruction becomes central to sustaining peace and long-term recovery.

#### 4. Evolutionary dynamics and windows of opportunity for institutional change

Post-conflict reconstruction should be understood not only as the outcome of political bargaining and policy design, but also as an evolutionary process shaped by path dependence and institutional lock-in. In stable environments, institutions tend to persist through self-reinforcing mechanisms such as increasing returns, coordination effects, and vested interests, which constrain the scope of feasible reforms. As emphasized in evolutionary and historical institutionalist scholarship, meaningful institutional change under such conditions is typically incremental rather than transformative, even when existing arrangements are inefficient or widely contested [Nelson, Winter, 1982; Pierson, 2000].

Large-scale disruptions such as wars can temporarily weaken these dynamics by destabilizing existing institutional routines, power relations, and expectations. Beyond physical destruction, conflict disrupts administrative practices, informal norms, and political coalitions that previously sustained institutional equilibria. From an evolutionary perspective, this disruption reduces the strength of path dependence and increases institutional plasticity, allowing alternative governance arrangements to enter the set of politically and administratively feasible options [Nelson, Winter, 1982]. These moments correspond to what historical institutionalists describe as critical junctures – short periods of heightened contingency in which choices made under uncertainty can have long-lasting effects by shaping new institutional trajectories [Capoccia, Kelemen, 2007; Acemoglu, Robinson, 2012]. During such junctures, the relative influence of structural constraints diminishes, while agency, ideas, and coalition-building play a more prominent role in determining reform outcomes.

Importantly, however, critical junctures do not imply institutional openness without limits. Even in post-conflict settings, reform options remain constrained by inherited administrative capacities, distributional conflicts, and asymmetries of power. As Mahoney and Thelen [2010] emphasize, institutional change is mediated by struggles over interpretation, enforcement, and implementation, meaning that reform trajectories depend on which actors are able to exploit ambiguity and mobilize support during periods of flux.

Within this framework, post-conflict periods can be conceptualized as windows of opportunity for institutional change in which the balance between interests and ideas temporarily shifts. Crises tend to weaken the dominance of entrenched interests while amplifying the role of reform-oriented coalitions and alternative policy paradigms. As pre-war arrangements lose legitimacy, previously marginal ideas may gain traction, enabling reforms that would normally face insurmountable political resistance [Hall, 1993; Rodrik, 2014]. Crucially, such windows of opportunity are inherently time-bound. As security improves and reconstruction progresses, new distributions of power and economic rents begin to crystallize. Over time, feedback mechanisms and increasing returns restore lock-in dynamics, narrowing the scope for transformative reform and reorienting institutional change toward incremental adjustment [Pierson, 2000]. As shown by Grindle and Thomas [1991], delays in reform can therefore be costly, as political support erodes and reform coalitions fragment once stabilization sets in.

Applied to Ukraine, this evolutionary perspective highlights that reconstruction is not merely about restoring pre-war institutions but about shaping a new institutional equilibrium under conditions of uncertainty and high stakes. Empirical evidence indicates that the war has not only disrupted pre-2022 governance structures but it has also generated unprecedented societal demand for institutional reform and reinforced the EU accession process as the central external anchor for institutional change [International Republican Institute, 2024; European Commission, 2023; ECFR, 2023]. Whether this moment results in durable institutional upgrading or renewed lock-in will depend on how effectively reform opportunities are sequenced, embedded, and defended before stabilization and vested interests close the window of opportunity.

## 5. Institutional strategies for recovery: comparative evidence from post-conflict contexts

Comparative evidence from post-conflict and post-disaster recoveries suggests that “reconstruction capacity” is not just funding plus engineering. It is a governance problem: the state must coordinate multiple principals (donors, firms, local governments, communities) under urgency, while preserving legitimacy and preventing capture. The cases summarized in Table 1 show that recovery

trajectories diverge primarily with the institutional wiring between the state, the market, and society – especially the rules that govern project selection, procurement, oversight, and local implementation.

**TABLE 1**

Institutional strategies for recovery: comparative evidence

Strategy	Example	Description	Outcome
Multi-level governance	Bosnia and Herzegovina; Kosovo (post-1999)	Reconstruction combined national authorities, subnational governments, and international actors (EU, UNMIK, OSCE). Donor coordination operated through multi-tier governance frameworks linking local projects with international oversight.	Mixed success. Enabled regional differentiation and donor coordination, but extensive international control weakened domestic ownership and institutional learning.
Central reconstruction agencies	Rwanda (post-1994 genocide)	Creation of centralized agencies (e.g., Rwanda Development Board) to coordinate reconstruction, development planning, and institutional reform under strong executive leadership.	Relative success. Strong coordination and low corruption supported rapid recovery, though at the cost of limited pluralism and highly centralized governance.
Accountability and oversight mechanisms	Liberia; GEMAP (2005–2008)	International experts embedded in key financial institutions with co-signature authority over major expenditures to ensure fiscal discipline and donor oversight.	Partial success. Improved short-term transparency, but heavy external control limited domestic capacity building and long-term legitimacy.
Build Back Better (BBB)	Japan (post-WWII); Chile (post-2010 earthquake)	Reconstruction used as a platform for institutional modernization: land reform, democratic governance, industrial policy (Japan); improved building codes, disaster governance, and PPP coordination (Chile).	Strong success. Institutional upgrading supported long-term growth and resilience; Chile became a benchmark for transparent public-private coordination.

Strategy	Example	Description	Outcome
Adaptive, community-driven governance	Afghanistan; National Solidarity Program (2003–2016)	Community development councils empowered to identify and manage local projects with flexible donor funding and iterative design.	Moderate success. Improved local ownership and service delivery, but fragile security and donor fatigue constrained institutionalization.
Public–Private Partnerships and civil society engagement	Indonesia (post-2004 tsunami)	Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency (BRR) coordinated state actors, NGOs, and private firms; strong transparency and community monitoring mechanisms.	Generally successful. Accelerated reconstruction, reduced corruption, and strengthened trust between citizens and the state.

Sources: Ansoms, Rostagno [2012]; Barron et al. [2011]; Beath et al. [2013]; Booth, Golooba-Mutebi [2012]; Chandler [2006]; Dower [1999]; International Crisis Group [2006]; Johnson [1982]; OECD [2010]; Paris [2004]; World Bank [2009, 2012].

The cases presented in the table should be understood not as best practices, but as institutional trade-offs observed under post-conflict constraints. Multi-level governance in Bosnia and Kosovo improved donor coordination and territorial differentiation, yet heavy international steering weakened domestic ownership and slowed institutional learning [Chandler, 2006; Paris, 2004]. The example of Liberia's GEMAP illustrates that strong external oversight can deliver short-term fiscal discipline, but may crowd out domestic capacity-building and generate legitimacy problems when control is perceived as externally imposed [International Crisis Group, 2006]. Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program shows how community-driven mechanisms can improve local ownership, while also revealing how fragile security conditions and donor fatigue limit institutionalization when local structures are not embedded within a durable state framework [Beath et al., 2013]. By contrast, Indonesia's post-tsunami recovery in Aceh demonstrates that public–private cooperation and civil society monitoring can function effectively at scale when coordinated through a credible reconstruction authority and supported by robust transparency mechanisms [World Bank, 2009; Barron et al., 2011].

Taken together, these contrasts point to three recurrent empirical patterns, each directly traceable to differences in institutional design. First, coordination without ownership is inherently unstable: arrangements that achieve coherence primarily through external control may ensure short-term compliance, but tend to weaken domestic learning and legitimacy, raising sustainability risks once aid declines [Chandler, 2006; Coyne, 2008; Pritchett et al., 2013]. Second, ownership without enforceable standards is insufficient: participatory or community-driven approaches enhance legitimacy, but require clear public rules, monitoring capacity, and integration with state systems to avoid fragmentation and uneven performance [Beath et al., 2013; World Bank, 2009]. Third, institutional upgrading proves most durable when reconstruction is used to reset governance rules, rather than merely rebuild assets, as illustrated by “build back better” trajectories in which reforms to standards, public administration, and coordination mechanisms become embedded in routine governance [Dower, 1999; Johnson, 1982; OECD, 2010].

For Ukraine, these patterns suggest that the central challenge is not choosing a single institutional model, but combining mechanisms in a way that preserves speed while strengthening institutional quality. Comparative evidence points toward an architecture based on strong central coordination to set standards, build project pipelines, and manage donor interfaces, combined with empowered local implementation anchored in transparent procedures and systematic capacity-building rather than ad hoc discretion. What is equally important are structured roles for firms and civil society in delivery and oversight, with open-data transparency and audit trails integrated into procurement and project monitoring from the outset. The mixed and partial outcomes observed in donor-driven reconstruction elsewhere underscore a key risk: parallel implementation structures may improve short-term control but often undermine domestic capability and legitimacy, thereby increasing long-run fragility [Coyne, 2008; Pritchett et al., 2013].

Seen in this light, reconstruction should be understood not as a purely technical exercise of replacing destroyed assets, but as a transformative institutional process unfolding under conditions of uncertainty and high stakes. It inevitably generates tensions between the speed of implementation and the quality of governance. While fast-track procedures and emergency measures may

accelerate visible recovery, comparative experience suggests that prioritizing speed at the expense of institutional safeguards can entrench governance weaknesses that persist long after reconstruction spending subsides [World Bank, 1998; Collier, 2009].

An issue that is closely related to this is the sequencing problem inherent in post-conflict recovery. Effective reconstruction requires institutions strong enough to manage large financial flows, coordinate multiple actors, and enforce rules, yet successful reconstruction itself is a key driver of institutional strengthening. This circular dependency implies that institutional development cannot be postponed until after reconstruction, but must be embedded within it from the outset. Where administrative capacity and accountability mechanisms remain weak, reconstruction risks amplifying corruption and rent-seeking; yet delaying recovery until institutions are fully rebuilt is neither feasible nor desirable [World Bank, 2004a; UNDP, 2010].

In this context, the EU accession process assumes particular importance as both a constraint and a catalyst for institutional design. A substantial literature demonstrates that the prospect of accession can function as an external institutional anchor, strengthening reform coalitions, constraining rent-seeking elites, and embedding domestic institutional change within credible external benchmarks [Vachudova, 2005; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier, 2004]. Ukrainian policy-oriented studies increasingly frame the EU accession process as a crucial external anchor for governance reform during reconstruction, reinforcing domestic reform coalitions rather than substituting national ownership [Razumkov Centre, 2025]. By linking reconstruction to legal harmonization, rule-of-law conditionality, and transparent governance standards, the accession framework offers a mechanism to reconcile speed with legitimacy and short-term recovery with long-term institutional resilience in Ukraine.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has examined post-conflict reconstruction through an institutional political economy perspective, emphasizing the role of institutions in shaping recovery trajectories under conditions of deep uncertainty. Drawing on insights

from institutional economics, evolutionary political economy, and comparative post-conflict experience, the analysis has conceptualized reconstruction as a transformative and path-shaping process, rather than a narrowly defined exercise of restoring pre-crisis economic structures. The focus has been on how institutional arrangements mediate trade-offs between efficiency, legitimacy, and resilience, and why these trade-offs are central to understanding recovery outcomes.

The central argument advanced here is that reconstruction outcomes depend less on the speed or scale of rebuilding than on the capacity to embed adaptive, transparent, and accountable institutional frameworks early in the recovery process, before self-reinforcing institutional dynamics re-emerge. Comparative experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of reconstruction is shaped primarily by the institutional interfaces governing coordination, implementation, and accountability, rather than by the volume of financial resources alone. Where institutional design is treated as a secondary or technical concern, reconstruction efforts risk reinforcing fragmentation, elite capture, and weak state capacity.

This perspective also casts Ukraine's reconstruction challenge in a more nuanced light. Ukraine will enter the recovery phase with institutional vulnerabilities that were widely documented in pre-war assessments and analytical studies, including persistent corruption, uneven rule of law, and limited administrative capacity [World Bank, 2021; European Commission, 2022; Åslund, 2015]. These conditions heighten the risk of a post-conflict fragility trap, in which large reconstruction inflows interact with weak institutions to undermine trust and reform momentum. At the same time, the war has disrupted pre-2022 institutional equilibria and created a rare window of opportunity for institutional change, marked by heightened societal expectations and a re-orientation of governance priorities. Whether this moment leads to durable institutional upgrading or renewed lock-in will depend on how institutional choices are made during the early phases of recovery.

From a comparative and evolutionary perspective, the key challenge is therefore not the selection of a single recovery model, but the management of institutional trade-offs between speed and quality, external oversight and

domestic ownership, and central coordination and local empowerment. The analysis suggests that resilient recovery requires combining strong central coordination with credible local implementation, embedding transparency and accountability into routine administrative practice, and structuring partnerships between the state, the market, and civil society within clear and enforceable rules. In this context, the EU accession process may function as an external anchor for institutional reform, provided that it reinforces rather than substitutes domestic institutional ownership. Ultimately, the long-term success of reconstruction will depend on whether early institutional choices strengthen state capacity, public trust, and economic resilience, rather than reproducing patterns of fragility and dependency.

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