

# Challenges of Accountability: The Case of Post-Soviet Estonian Rural Local Governments

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## Abstract

Accountability in social work is carried out in two dimensions, in the interaction between professionalism and social work practice. The aim of this research is to explore administrative social work accountability in Estonian rural local governments. The utilized methodology has been the collective case study (Mills 2010; Punch 2009). I followed the information-oriented selection: the cases of maximum variation by size and location (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1996). Triangulation has been used as a procedure for acquiring data. Further analysis was conducted by using a taxonomic approach (Ragin 2011). The lack of national regulation with an insufficient understanding of social work has affected the local governments' ability to choose the best of the available opinions. An agreement has been missing as to how the local government shares responsibility with the State and the families. In the current situation, the responsibilities of each of the parties are not specified. The situation is unclear-who is actually the client of the rural local government? The local-centered approach makes the local government's social work practice politically loaded. In the future, however, the model of an independent professional social worker and of the recipient being the most important participant of the service provider system should prevail.

**Keywords:** Estonia, Accountability, Rural Local Government, Social Work Practice.

## 1. Introduction

It is important to recognize that both the nature and purposes of social work are constructed within diverse social and political environments and take rather different forms in different societies (Weiss-Gal & Levin 2010; Payne 2008). In Estonia, social work as a profession was restarted in 1991, and it has been a new adoption of the post-communist society after regaining independence. The process of the development of social work in Estonia has impacts from the first period of Estonian independence, from the experiences of „Old Europe,“ and from the Soviet period (Raudava 2013a). Social work can be defined in relationship with social welfare where the administration of social work transforms into human services. Since 1995, social work is mainly organized by local governments in Estonia. The preparation and adoption of the Social Care (Welfare) Act of Estonia in 1995 followed the general principles of the corresponding law from the first period of independence. Estonian local governments have re-established the duties of local government, following the model developed in 1918-1940.

The main responsibility for the social services rests with highly autonomous local governments. „Welfare Municipalities“ is a concept used to underline the significant role of independent municipalities in the distribution of social services in the Nordic countries (Trydegård & Thorslund 2000). As in the Nordic countries, Estonian local governments enjoy great autonomy and can decide on their own affairs independently. Locally elected politicians make all major policy decisions regarding the matters of their responsibility, and the municipal councils and committees

establish goals and guidelines for the local government's operations (Minas 2010; Kröger 2009).

Exploring social work practice in the small local governments, using cross-local government comparison, I found that dual practices have been carried out by utilizing statewide, as well as locally centered practices (Raudava 2013b). The state-centered practice refers to the decentralized duties of the State. The local government administers subsistence benefits, benefits for disabled children and, since 2014, the need-based (income based) family benefit. The local governments have developed their public services independently and with big differences in their practice. The local benefits are part of the local government budget, therefore representing social policy. Social benefits are mostly related to the level of income (proven poverty) which can be verified by documented expenses. At the same time, there are many target-based benefits for children, families, the disabled, and the elderly. Social service is not a freely available universal service. The local-centered practice refers to the local government's own established social policy.

During the first period of the independent State, the principle of collegial decision-making - boards or panels, where the board or panel members are the local residents, has been dominant in the rural local governments. The positions of independent social caregivers or social workers did not exist.

The aim of this research is to shed light on accountability in social work. Accountability is a theoretically embedded concept with each theory producing various conflicting models of accountability (Walker 2002). The origins of accountability and accountability and democratic governance have always been central concerns in the study of social policy, and administrations have to grow up with New Public Management which emerged in the 1990s. As an ideological current, New Public Management (NPM) emphasized the use of market mechanisms in the public sector to make managers and providers more responsive and accountable.

Originally, Shedler (1999) developed the clearest and most basic exposition of the concept of accountability whereby public accountability comprises a relationship between the power-holder (account-provider) and the delegator (account-demander). In other words, accountability is a process whereby the performance of commitments must be matched with the holding of responsibilities (Apreda 2014). There are four elements of this accountability relationship: setting standards, getting information about actions, making judgments about appropriateness, and sanctioning unsatisfactory performance (Joshi 2013).

Social work can be defined in relationship with social welfare, where the administration of social work transforms into human services. The welfare reforms have involved trade-offs between different accountability types, such as political, administrative, legal and social accountability (Benish 2013; Byrkjeflot, Christensen & Læg Reid 2013).

Accountability of social work is carried out in two dimensions, in the interaction between professionalism and social work practice (Encyclopedia of Canadian Social Work 303). As stated in Thomas (2013), accountability in social work means being obliged and responsible to others. Borrero, Martens & Borrero (2014) have defined accountability in social work as a statement of clear intent by the service provider (agency, worker, etc.) and the recipient of the intended services (client system) and the evaluation of the effectiveness and/or efficiency of the intent of both parties.

In Estonia, regarding the State's decentralized duties, the local government is administering the subsistence benefit, the disabled children benefit, and, since 2014, the need-based (income based) family benefit. The main public social welfare organizer has been the local government. The Estonian local government could be described as a hierarchical structure, comprised of the representative body and the executive body (the political and administrative units). The two parts describe the social service obligations, but they do not define who should be the implementer of the specific duties. The Social Welfare Care Act gives it a general name: "social care (welfare) administration"; § 8 defines the Duties of Local Governments in the Administration of Social Care (Welfare).

In the post-communist society, there is no specific qualification required for a person filling the position of a social worker (Raudava 2020, 2018, 2017). General standards for social work or the social services do not exist at the local government level. However, accountability of administrative social welfare means that social work has to be conducted with professional legitimacy and by the order of a public organization.

I have used a macro-meso level approach to accountability of social work. Following the complex understanding of accountability in social work with the administrative focus, the research question of the current paper is to explore whether administrative social work has been held accountable in the rural local governments.

## **2. Theoretical Overview**

### **The order**

Public administration in the European tradition has been based on law, with the emphasis on the legal foundations of all public actions. Furthermore, executing public duties defined by law is incorporated into a constitutional formula of executive authorities (in countries that have a written constitution), among legislative and judicature (Badie, Berg-Schlosser & Morlino 2011). The public social welfare is shared between the EU, State, and local power.

According to Christensen, Lægreid, Roness & Røvik (2007, 1-8), public and private organizations are fundamentally different in certain key respects. Public interests differ from private interests since the public sector must consider a broader set of norms and values. Local government, the public organization as a specific domain, is defined by the concrete political bodies and administrative structures which are governing public affairs-. Constitutions, organics and procedures provide the conceptual glue which generates its unity and its limits (Pierre & Peters 2013; Badie, Berg-Schlosser & Morlino 2011; Mantzarinos 2011; Sullivan 2009).

The local government is considered the main agent in the field of social welfare, especially in solving problems concerning the availability of social services. It's the responsibility of public agencies to provide guarantees for their citizens to have an opportunity to receive social services from the local government.

Today's public agencies must demonstrate that they value diversity, understand and respect diverse cultures, and plan and provide culturally relevant and responsive programs and services (Chow & Austin 2008). Therefore, public organizations must be accountable in terms of two different types of accountabilities: functional accountability and ethical accountability (Considine 2005, 208). In addition, there are two axes to be considered: vertical accountability refers to the relationship between the citizen and the state; horizontal accountability is internal to the structure itself (Martin & Frahm 2010; Jayal 2008).

The identity of social work is a collective identity. The responsibility of the European public sector is to ensure that citizens can seek and receive support. Social work administration as direct social services in the European tradition has been based on law, with the emphasis on the legal foundations of all public actions (Peters & Pierre 2013). Moreover, the European Union has been conceived as a community of law:

“The body of rules whereby a civilised society maintains orders and regulates its internal affairs as between one individual and another, and between individuals and the state” (Lens 2007).

The public responsibility is set to guarantee to the citizens that they have the opportunity to seek and get social services from the local government and to point out accountability at the local government level (Walker 2002). Well-organized care for fellow citizens forms an essential part of citizen participation in society and enhances democratic processes. Joshi (2013) has summarized the debates about strengthening accountability and has focused on two types of initiatives: by increasing government transparency, accountability initiatives have emerged as a key strategy for improving public services and social accountability.

### **Professional Legitimacy of Social Work**

Social work has emerged as a unique field of study and practice with its own knowledge base, professional standards, values, ethics, licensure, certification, accredited schools and degrees (Loreto 2011; Ramsay 2003). According to the Global Standards of Social Work, academic education is the most important component of professionalism.

The Global Minimum Qualifying Standards Committee was set up as a joint initiative of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The final version of the Global Standards for Social Work Education and

Training was adopted by IASSW and IFSW at their General Assemblies in Adelaide, Australia in October 2014.

The paradigm of the profession includes a broad orientation toward people being served and identifies social work as a community of likeminded people with a shared understanding of the profession and how it is practiced. As a profession, social workers have the responsibility to further the principle of social justice by challenging discrimination on all levels, including discrimination based on one's socio-economic status (Chase 2015).

Social work qualifies for acceptance into the fold of professional occupations (Webb 2017) where the theoretical knowledge base for professional qualification is "academic knowledge" (Heggen 2008). Referred to Thomas (2013): "Accountability is important for the social work professional as it supports a degree of autonomous action prohibited in other fields of social care activity".

Being a professional means being accountable for judgment, intervention, and decision making, as society increasingly demands accountability from professionals. As members of the social work profession, social workers are professionally accountable; they must adhere to the code of practice and regulations set by the professional body. However, in terms of service accountability, social workers must satisfy clients' needs and help solve their problems (Mäntysaari 2005).

### **The Standards of the Client System**

The foundation of practice in social work includes an understanding of the process of identification and development of the client system - it is adapted to work with individuals, families, groups, and communities. In their work, the social worker focuses on three main aspects: 1) definition of the client's needs (Coulshed & Orme 2006, 43); 2) contribution to the maintenance of social institutions; and 3) contribution to the preservation of the community (Payne 1995, 25) while ensuring the protection of the client. In other words, social workers act on micro, meso and macro levels (Brueggemann 2005).

The client system is the collection of people that the social worker is assigned to help. Changing contexts of social work have made it possible to fully involve service users and careers in delivering better and safer practice outcomes. A service user-led and relation-focused approach is an essential point in the discussion of accountability. This requires the local government to work effectively with people and families to make the most of their emotional and practical assets as well as accessing the social services and support they need. The users as co-producers take up their civic roles as members of communities in cooperating with service managers and professionals or by building their own services (Munday 2007).

### **3. Methodology**

The strategy of research (methodology) utilizes case study. Bennett and Elman (2007) pointed out that the aim of a case study is to understand the case in depth and in its natural setting while recognizing its complexity and its context. The collective case study means that the instrumental case study is extended to cover several cases in order to learn more about the phenomenon (Mills 2010; Punch 2009).

The data in the social sciences are obtained in both formal and informal settings and involve oral and written documentation. The data of this research are based on a mix of evidence (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1996). Utilizing a triangulation, the evidence involves Metadata (Documentation and Metadata): 1) The data based on public documents (The Ministry of Social Affairs and the legal acts; 2) Local documents including local legal acts, meeting protocols and unpublished documents; and 3) The Web Pages of local governments.

The configuration between the inter-organizational and the intra-organizational analysis has been conducted with a taxonomic approach. The complementary configurations have been frequently made up of multiple components, commonly found together (Ragin 2011; Ragin 2009). The report has been produced in order to interact with the organization where the research had been conducted. Besides providing an analytical chronology, the diagnostic case features a listing and analysis of current problems (Fiss, Cambre & Marx 2013).

### **Application**

### **The Public Order**

The Estonian national government has given the responsibility for social services to local governments without securing any funding to them in order to enable them to follow the order. Lack of national regulation with an insufficient understanding of social work has impacted local government's ability to find the best of available options. The General Standards of Social Work do not exist in Estonia. According to the Estonian Social Welfare Act, the target groups are children, people with disabilities, the elderly, ex-convicts, and people with emergency social needs. Their need for support is comprehensive. However, the public criteria have not been formulated and the question about who the client of social work in the local municipality is has not been agreed upon at the level of the local government.

In Estonia, due to the decentralized duties, appointed by the State, the local government is administering the subsistence benefit, the disabled children benefit and, since 2014, the need-based (income based) family benefit, and the control mechanism is based on the online program STAR. There are no decentralized social services provided by local governments and funded by the national government.

The responsibility of the public sector is to ensure that citizens can seek and receive support from the local government and, importantly, to point out accountability at the local government level. The lack of a base definition causes every individual interpreting by him/herself the challenges and opportunities of the local government. Local people receive social services depending on how the local authorities understand their obligations.

### **Information about Actions**

Public information has the purpose to inform about the type of services available to the local people. Public information is a public duty, and each local government is obligated to provide information. All information about local affairs is required to be public on the website of the local government. Free and easy public access to the information of the government is considered to be a part of being accountable.

The general understanding of social work has been very limited in Estonia, especially from the perspective of an „ordinary“ person. Usually elderly people would not even consider social work as useful to them. There was little scope for understanding beyond the possibility of getting social benefits, and even there was very little information available. Consequently, the local residents unfortunately did not have clear information about social services provided by their local government.

The local governments have developed a procedure for applying for social benefits on the internet. This affects the ability of rural population to access social services or even to apply for social benefits. Although Estonia is considered a country with a high rate of internet use, elderly and disabled people often do not have a computer or internet connection. Also, some single parents have had difficulties to access the internet. Digital solutions could be an alternative but not made compulsory in current circumstances. Estonian national progress remains inconsistent in this area. While Estonia is famous as a high tech digital nation, all its residents do not have access to the information about the social services of their local government.

### **A Servant in the Public Duties**

The status of social work as a profession reflects the history of the country in Estonia. The occupation of social worker has not been defined at the local government level since the government was restored. There is no law or legal standard at the national level setting requirements to employ a civil servant working as a social worker in the local government. (This study does not involve the new requirement for child protection workers from 2016). The distribution of state benefits does not require a professional as the state sets conditions for calculating benefits, based on mathematics such as household income - expenses documented by accounting-type documents. Due to this problem many municipal employees in the field of social work still lack professional training.

Using the general name "social care (welfare) administration" has facilitated the sharing of the responsibilities of the social worker with other officials of different fields. The administration of social welfare involves several units: the municipal council; the committee of social affairs of the council or/and the committee of social affairs of the municipal government; the municipal

administration as the employer; and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

As a result, the administration has four models involved: 1) the political leadership, 2) the political co-operation, 3) the specialist or non-professional, and 4) the political-administrative unit (the ministry of social affairs) (Raudava 2013a). The responsibilities are shared between several administrative levels and the framework of administration involves professionals and/or non-professionals and the professionals of another field. There are two options to define the position of social worker: a) a civil servant, or b) as a professional social worker.

### **Lack of the involvement of a Social Worker in the Process of Decision Making**

The main problem becomes apparent in the practice of administering social welfare. The principle of collegial decision-making is evident in the process. The committee of social affairs submits proposals to either municipal council or municipal government who makes the final decisions. There are many levels of the decision-making process. Therefore, I argue that the decision-making process at the client level does not follow the understanding of professional social work.

Most importantly, the issue of client protection requires attention as the members of the committee of social affairs are ordinary rural residents who become aware of all client cases and the details involved but are not bound by an obligation to maintain confidentiality. If a client case is further debated in the council or municipal government, it can become even more public. Another level of exposure comes from a new digital solution employed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, requiring client reports in addition to statistical reports. As a result of the structure of local government's social work, the decision-making process concerning individual clients is shared between different levels of government.

The decision-making process follows the principle of collegial decision-making. I argue that unfortunately the decision-making process at the client level is politically loaded. The position of the employer in the field of social work is ambiguous: The social worker is not included in making the decisions at the client level. The local government and the social worker cannot protect the rights of their clients in the decision-making process. The decision-making process can be harmful for the client. Advocating for the clients' best interests also involves protecting the clients. This practice includes several problems stemming from the ethics of social work and the profession's independence. Using the collective style in the decision-making process lacks the understanding of the functional ethical code of social work, human rights, and human dignity. Apparently, it also lacks skills and knowledge. According to the law the committee of social affairs should provide only general guidance.

### **Assessment**

After the re-establishment of independence, county governments were restored. Each county had a social affairs department within the local government. During the early years, the county governments had their own independent budgets which allocated money for the reconstruction of the social welfare system. It was done differently in each county. County governments took over the responsibility of administering nursing homes and orphanages and were the representatives of the state government conducting supervision of local governments. The responsibilities of county governments were steadily reduced over the years until their complete liquidation in 2018.

The Ministry of Social Affairs has gathered statistics from local governments and providers of social services over the years. The Ministry of Social Affairs compiles data to produce overall statistics but does not show the description of the situation on the ground. The online STAR application, launched in the winter of 2010, requires that, in addition to the statistical data and subsistence benefit calculations, the social workers also compile reports of their client work. The social workers have argued that the program requires too much attention while they do not have time for face-to-face client work. The bureaucracy has increased, and nobody can describe the positive impact of the data collection on the daily local practice.

The social committee in a local government also reviews issues relating to schools or day care, where the children need to be tested due to the parents' refusal to recognize problems. There are also issues and disputes between neighbors. The issues are presented to the committee to decide whether to accept or decline the application. In general, with the partial exception of one municipality,

the first discussion occurs in the social affairs“ committee, which sends a proposal to either the municipal government or the municipal council, who would then make the final decision. Decisions are based on the state and local government`s statutes and regulations.

The assessment also involves the question of control. As the general standards of social work are missing, the practice cannot be evaluated. This unclear situation and big differences between the local governments continue because there is no control over their activities and no evaluation of their methods from the perspective of contemporary social work according to the new European Social Model.

The lack of clarity about who is the client of a local government along with the unclear rules from the legal framework makes it impossible to evaluate the effectiveness of the practice of social work.

### The Dual Accountability in the Local Government

Based on the results of the research, several challenges can be identified for an accountability view in the local governments (Table 1).

Table 1. The dual accountability in the local government

Pattern	State-centered practice	Local-centered practice
The order	The de-centralized task	Their own practice
Theoretical understanding	The discourse of need-based	The starting point has been poverty
The standards	Description matching by law	The local government“s client is not clearly defined. The client's “status” prior to the application process or the qualified status
Information	The State-level information on webpages	The local web page
The methods of implementation	Cash benefits	The list of local cash benefits and social services
An Occupation/ Profession	The Civic servant (occupation)	The principle of collegial decision-making; Social worker without professional power
Making judgements about appropriateness	Mathematical act	Politicized decision
Assessment	The files have been placed into “STAR”	de jure, the local budget is part of the State budget;

The public criteria have not been formulated and the question about who the social work client of the local municipality is has not been agreed upon at the local government level. It is unclear how to share the responsibility between the family and local government.

The position of social worker is ambivalent and without professional power; 3) The structure of administration involves non-professionals who are professionals in another field, or non-educated members; 4) The decision-making process regarding the clients is distributed among different levels; 5) The biggest challenge impacting the cases is the decision-making at the client level being highly politicized. Moreover, I have discovered that transparency, more specifically the rate of transparency in the social services, pointed out big differences in the social service practice (Raudava 2015, 2017).

### 4. Discussion

Public responsibility is laid out to guarantee for the citizens the opportunity to receive social services and, importantly, point out accountability at the local government level (Olesen 2015). Public discussion is missing in Estonian society, and this impacts local government’s obligations. However, in Estonia, there are different understandings of the goals of public social work. Falling into the shadows is explained by the focus on social protection as the basis of system-building and political

ideology has been limited to assistance for the poor - guaranteeing minimum subsistence (subsistence benefit). My research has shown that the re-thinking of the progress of welfare strategy has continued over the years. A fundamental change took place in the period from 1999 to 2003 (Raudava 2013c).

Implementing the best practice, therefore, needs to be informed by theoretical understanding. In developing social work practice, Thompson (2000) has stressed that practice must be grounded on: a) clarifying the basis of the intervention and objectives set; b) explaining the actions taken to meet the objectives and reasons for doing it; and c) evaluating the intervention. However, the best practice must be an anti-discriminatory practice. The actual challenge of Estonian public discussion should be about how to ensure the constitutional right of every citizen to receive governmental support from a local government in case of need and in addition to the list of orders compulsory for all. The legislative framework affects the functions of local government; however, the local policy is directly related to the ability of a person to cope with his or her life independently.

In the Estonian public sphere understanding of the minimum or maximum services is the main question. Mäntysalo (2016) has noted that the ethical maximum is achieved with a combination of regulation and values. Regulation alone does not guarantee ethical conduct or the perception of ethical public service. In situations where the tasks are set in general terms, the local government's clients should define them, and the minimum standards of social welfare services should also be set. Most importantly, public duties are mandatory for all local governments.

The design of a formal organizational structure depends on the degree and form of specialization and coordination, and those bureaucratic organizational forms involve hierarchy, routines and divisions of labor. Such structural features may also apply to the ways of organizing the reform process within and between public organizations (Christensen, Læg Reid, Roness & Røvik 2007). As for specialization, organizational questions may be allocated to positions and units specifically designed for organizational tasks, for example units for organizational development, or positions and units whose tasks concern selected parts of society, for example units that organize contact with specific user groups. How specialized this work is depends on how many such positions and units there are and how many organizations they serve (Senior 2002). Given that social work is a knowledge-based profession, the position and functions of each employee at the local government level should be clearly formulated (Kidd 2010; McAuley, Duberley & Johnson 2007; Hatch & Cunliffe 2006).

The social affairs committee could be regarded as a citizen-based group, and their activity must be limited to solving the strategic matters. In practice, the main activities are participating in client work — deciding on the allocation of social benefits and the use of social services. This practice includes several problems stemming from social work ethics and the profession's independence; autonomy is based on several problems. In the use of the collective style for the decision-making process, there is a lack of understanding about the function of the ethical code of the social worker, about human rights and human dignity, apparently also about the lack of skills and knowledge. Gray and Gibbons (2007) have argued that ethical guidelines do not guarantee ethical social work practice, but professional intervention requires professional knowledge. Therefore, the decision should be in the purview of the social worker, as only the social worker can offer the client appropriate solutions based on social work goals.

According to Reisch (2013) and Higham (2006, 98), the new professionalism of social work is based on: 1) promoting the social model of intervention with people who use services and care; 2) working with other professional models and with support workers; 3) intervening to protect vulnerable people when appropriate; and, 4) promoting human growth and developing individual capabilities. Gorman and Sandefur (2011) pointed out that four central attributes of professionalism emerge from this body of scholarship: (a) expert knowledge; (b) technical autonomy; (c) a normative orientation toward the service of others; and (d) high status, income, and other rewards. However, social work is an authority-based profession (Gambrill 2001). Social workers should be knowledgeable about the profession's history and commit to the enhancement of the profession and their own professional conduct and growth (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Strom-Gottfried 2013).

According to Dybicz (2010), the social work practices supported by postmodern discourse require the social worker to adopt a critical consciousness. This critical consciousness views each

client as creating his or her own world and views human action as springing from the social construction process - hence, an understanding of how power influences the construction process for the client is vital. Critical consciousness - in the form of understanding existential oppression, becomes the authority base for social work as this knowledge is necessary to view and open possibilities for the client, the pursuit of which underlies human action and professionalizes the public assistance workforce (Altman 2008). Using the term knowledge base, applied to a profession, means the key theoretical frameworks supported by research that are used by that profession (Satka 2013, Rutter & Fisher 2013, Swanzen 2011; Trevithick 2008).

## 5. Conclusion

Well-organized welfare for fellow citizens forms an essential part of citizen participation in society and enhances democratic processes. Following the European tradition, accountable practice must be based on laws, local resources, and the assessment of the needy without forgetting the goals and values of social work. A macro-meso-level approach of accountability in administrative social work is to be conducted by the professional legitimately and firsthand, according to the order of public organization.

Being a professional means being accountable for judgment, intervention, and decision making, as society increasingly demands accountability from professionals. As members of the social work profession, social workers are professionally accountable; they must adhere to the code of practice and regulations set by the professional body. In terms of service accountability, social workers must satisfy clients' needs and help solve their problems (The Encyclopaedia of Canadian Social Work 2005, 303).

Consequently, it is essential for the social worker to be a qualified professional because there is no way of keeping "the actor" and "the act" apart from each other in the discussion about accountable practice, especially in the decision-making process.

Given that social work is a knowledge-based profession, the position and functions of each employee at the local government level should be clearly formulated (Kidd 2010; McAuley, Duberley & Johnson 2007). As I have pointed out, such an approach presents a difficulty in post-communist local governments; however, the question of an independent professional social worker as a pattern is the most important one from the point of view of the recipient of accountability.

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