

Post 2027 | Consultation Report

7. Future of ISO1

14 January 2025

The future of Interreg Specific Objective 1

This report is part of Interact's [Post 2027 Consultation reports](#)

Overview

Good governance is crucial for addressing shared challenges in border regions, as well as across larger transnational areas. In that context, Interreg is working on important issues such as building trust among communities across borders, tackling legal and administrative obstacles to cooperation, preparing and implementing cross-border services, or building capacity for the implementation of EU macro-regions and sea basin strategies, as well as the European Directives through a new Interreg specific objective introduced in the 2021-2027 programming period: ISO1 focusing on better cooperation governance.

ISO1 has been adopted by a vast majority of Interreg programmes. It should be used as a catalyst to make cooperation in defined areas and programme strategies work better and more sustainably. Although ISO1 appears to be successful, challenges remain in its implementation. Some of the observations included in this discussion paper are based on ongoing projects and programmes' approaches and experiences. They can, however, give ideas about possible regulatory repairs and inspirational ideas for a better future.

Methodology

This document includes reflections¹, ideas and examples mainly collected through Interact events (e.g. Interreg Knowledge Fair 2023² and 2024³) as well as a survey launched on the future of ISO1 (Sept. – Oct. 2024). Additional information was extracted from a report drafted by ANCT (France) following a workshop, during which French programmes could discuss their approaches regarding the selection and

¹ Publication | [ISO 1: Better Cooperation Governance](#) (October 2020)

² IKF Materials | [Governance in Interreg](#) (May 2023)

³ Interreg Knowledge Fair 2024 Day 2 | [Promoting cross-border services: Interreg specific objectives for Interreg specific solutions](#) (March 2024)

implementation of that Interreg specific objective. An online survey was also launched in September 2024 to collect further feedback.

As a second step, the results of the consultation process and key messages collected were presented during an online webinar (5/11/ 2024). After that, all programme authorities invited to the Harvesting event (Brussels, 25-26/11/2024) were asked to carefully read all discussion papers. During the event, parallel workshops were organised, among which one was on the future of ISO1, and repeated twice. Participants actively shared their views on the topic and certain statements and ideas put forward by programmes regarding the future period. Slido⁴ was used to test some of the messages included in the discussion paper, and to collect further input. The discussion paper published in November 2024 has been revised based on the views expressed during the Harvesting event.

What is working

ISO1 offers sufficient coverage and supports the implementation of relevant governance-related actions in all Interreg strands. **Building institutional capacity is key** as it allows local and regional authorities **to engage effectively in cooperation**. A wide range of activities and programme approaches (e.g. online learning platforms, training programmes for officials, peer reviews, thematic communities) serve the purpose. Interreg IPA Romania-Serbia has even selected ISO1 to tackle cross-border criminality. The [SAFE](#) project is working towards a safer climate within its border area by organising joint training of border police.

ISO1 covers **building up mutual trust**, by encouraging people-to-people actions, and supports bottom-up approaches. This is widely used in CBC programmes. For example, [EstLat programme's project Trust2Integrate](#) aims to foster mutual trust through people-to-people actions and enhance social inclusion for people with disabilities.

Enhancing institutional capacity also leads to the creation of **effective and sustainable institutional partnerships** that extend beyond individual projects and set a solid foundation for continued cooperation even after funding periods end. This is the case of [EHRIN](#) which aims at strengthening cooperation governance for hydrogen development. This project develops strategies in the setting of three concrete Hydrogen projects and a transnational partnership.

ISO1 is a **successful tool for removing legal and administrative obstacles to cooperation**. In this context, Interreg Hungary-Slovakia has started a mapping project to identify cross-border obstacles ([#ACCESS](#) project). POCTEFA has adopted an interesting approach with the launch of a [questionnaire](#) to programmes' stakeholders and citizens to identify obstacles to cross-border cooperation. POCTEFA foresees to open calls for proposals based on the results of this questionnaire and will propose two

⁴ See Annex 1

types of modules based on the level of experience of the actors to be involved: (i) one module to allow the identification of potential solutions for the less experienced ones; (ii) one module for the most experienced ones (i.e. Euroregions) where obstacles have already been identified and where joint problem-solving can start. The [Coordination Point Border Obstacles Flanders-Netherlands](#) is another interesting example.

ISO1 supports the development of **integrated cross-sectoral approaches that are not primarily thematically driven** as the Policy objectives in the ERDF regulation. The Plans Intégrés TERritoriaux (PITER+) launched by Interreg France Italy ALCOTRA and its [ALPIMED+](#) recently approved project, as well as the [Integrated Territorial Cooperation Plans \(PTIC\)](#) from Interreg France-Switzerland are excellent examples. ISO1 gives programmes the possibility to address governance and integrated territorial development approaches, without being bound to the strict implementation requirements of PO5 in the 2021-2027 programming period.

ISO1 has a **multiplier effect**, creating a favourable environment for implementing other Interreg objectives. Indeed, an action undertaken under ISO1 can set the ground for other initiatives to be implemented under other POs.

ISO1 supports the development of **innovative approaches and participatory processes**: The [GEtCoheSive](#) project, funded by Interreg Central Europe, develops and tests inclusive governance practices to improve public authorities' capacities to engage with citizens from vulnerable backgrounds, especially in light of environmental policies and access to care services.

ISO1 is a **very flexible policy tool** which **can also address the unexpected needs of any Interreg programme** through "Other actions to support better cooperation governance". It is, for instance, very relevant for OMR programmes (e.g. The Indian Ocean and Caribbean), which need to find efficient ways to cooperate with third countries and combine ERDF/NDICI funding. In the case of the Caribbean programme, they will, for instance, use ISO1 to further develop their partnership with international organisations such as OECS (Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States), and to bring local stakeholders that are not used to work together to create common pathways.

Transnational programmes **widely use ISO1 for capitalisation and embedding of results and to support existing MRS and SBS**. [Interreg Baltic Sea Region](#) has set up project platforms to help EU-funded projects connect their results and make them available for policymakers and professionals across different sectors, but it also looks at ways to better coordinate and communicate the implementation of EUSBSR. [Interreg Euro-MED](#) is structured around four missions. It supports one Thematic Community project to embed project results and develop strategies to support their effective transfer, and one Institutional Dialogue project for each of the four missions and the whole duration of the programming period. Interreg NPA has launched a [Call for clustering projects \(interreg-npa.eu\)](#) together with Interreg Aurora to facilitate synergies and clustering among Arctic and near-Arctic stakeholders.

ISO1 is **perfectly adapted to the Interreg Europe programme** which is **fully dedicated to capacity building**. It also allows the programme to cover all topics related to the Cohesion policy. The possibility to select one single priority also contributes to greatly simplifying the programme's implementation (e.g. one single priority means also one single budget allocated to operations).

What is missing and needs improving

A **more detailed formulation in the regulation and a better definition** of governance and the related objectives with possible actions/sub-objectives/sub-themes would allow the Interreg programmes to opt more easily for one approach or another. Governance can be addressed through ISO1, PO5, or even other POs. That makes it difficult for potential applicants to understand concretely the current opportunities offered by ISO1 as well as the possible actions that can be carried out. An additional list of more specific topics or sub-themes in the regulation, for instance, may help get the messages through and attract beneficiaries.

A more exhaustive explanation **of how transnational programmes can support MRS** in place could be provided. Programmes still need guidance on how to use ISO1 for that purpose and on the kind of actions that can be implemented.

Certain initiatives setting up cooperation frameworks do not necessarily **link with the Interreg programme** located in the concerned area. As an example, the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI) was created in 2023 to reinforce cooperation in maritime spatial planning among nine countries from the North Sea, with limited coordination with Interreg North Sea.

The possibility of addressing synergies under ISO1 could be explored, too.

Some transnational programmes also suggest the possibility of allowing **piloting and testing** under ISO1, plus a possibility for investments where needed to further potential development.

ISO1 seems to be **not yet used to its full potential**. This might be partly due to the fact that there is not sufficient knowledge yet among Interreg programmes on the different ways this objective is implemented and the possibilities it offers. This lack of knowledge can also explain the difficulty in engaging potential beneficiaries. Since capacity building is something that Interreg programmes do through regular projects, **strong guidance and additional events need to be provided on ISO1 to get applicants on board**. Interact should support exchanging experiences, approaches and practices to better implement ISO1 (e.g. calls for proposals).

Use existing structures to collect information and boost project generation. Running project generation only as a bottom-up process based on open calls might not bring the right projects to address key topics or to bridge important gaps. Solid initiatives, structures and tools are available to understand the situation on the ground and to design new projects and possible solutions (e.g. b-

solutions). Euroregions, EGTCs and other cross-border structures can also consult their citizens on the services they find to be lacking or those that could be improved in their region.

People-to-people/small projects are important tools to reach new beneficiaries and engage with communities. However, their administrative complexity and time-consuming nature cannot be ignored. Measures could be implemented (SCOs, Technical Assistance) to **ensure that the administrative requirements do not outweigh the benefits**.

It is hard to **measure, quantify, and demonstrate the real impact of governance-related improvements**. The approaches and expected results also seem heterogeneous. There should be better indicators (e.g. for capacity building) to make it easier to aggregate the data.

Showcase success stories and tangible benefits of cooperation. Since Interreg Specific Objectives are a novelty under the 2021-2027 period, potential applicants may not see their full potential either. Targeted communication strategies are needed to increase public awareness of cross-border governance initiatives, and engage citizens and relevant stakeholders. There are ways in which Interreg brings real added value and that needs to be widely promoted (e.g. trust building between regions, new networks, increased connections between regions).

What would be your vision for the future?

ISO1 can be considered **a successful tool** given the fact that a vast majority of Interreg programmes selected it and the way it is being implemented, with significant impact through its leverage effect. In addition, ISO1 is clearly **relevant for all Interreg strands**, even though further development might be considered to reach its full potential. **The flexibility** it offers **is crucial** and of high added value. This should undoubtedly be kept for the future.

ISO1 should be given **more strategic weight and visibility**, e.g. by elevating it to the level of a Policy objective in the future ERDF regulation in order to better recognise and reflect its importance for future Interreg programmes and of Interreg as such within the whole EU cohesion policy. ISO1 combines all unique selling points of Interreg, such as improved cooperation, better governance, territoriality and cross-sectoral/integrated approaches, as well as long-term solutions by supporting and building lasting networks and cooperation. However, **strengthening ISO1 does not require a deep change in the future regulatory framework**. A better formulation of what governance is, and what can be done through ISO1 could help attract potential applicants. Additional guidance shall be provided (e.g. an additional list of topics/sub-themes).

Strengthening bottom-up governance approaches through ISO1 allows local communities and stakeholders to take the lead in addressing shared challenges and promoting solutions that are tailored to regional needs while aligning with EU priorities. **Local knowledge is key** to overcoming administrative and legal barriers across borders. However, **top-down approaches should be**

guaranteed as well. Key programme stakeholders and policymakers should reflect upon the needs on their territory and define a strategy accordingly. Their active involvement is needed to stimulate the generation of relevant projects.

ISO1 has played an **important role in the development and improvement of CPS**⁵ (Cross-border Public Services). Through capacity-building and trust-building initiatives, ISO1 ensures that public authorities and regional stakeholders are equipped to work together, implement joint services, and respond effectively to crises in a more resilient way, thus helping to implement needed reforms. This is where Interreg can make an important contribution. Future Interreg programmes could, therefore, be designed with a strategic view on how public services could be established in the long-run with short- and medium-term actions to be implemented in an Interreg project. The transnational dimension is to be considered.

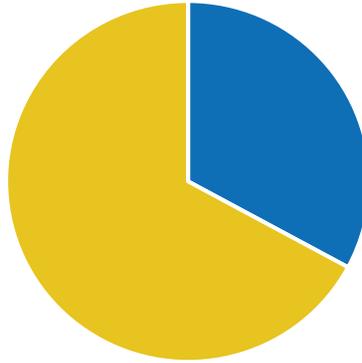
Many Interreg programmes wish to **reach out to new beneficiaries** for whom cooperation is not well known but may be beneficial. This may require targeted search and communication with the relevant institutions, as well as further guidance on how to boost project generation. ISO1 being a novelty in the 2021-2027 period, benefits and added value of Interreg projects carried out under that specific objective shall be shared and widely communicated.

⁵ [CPS - Cross-border Public Services | ESPON](#)

Annex 1

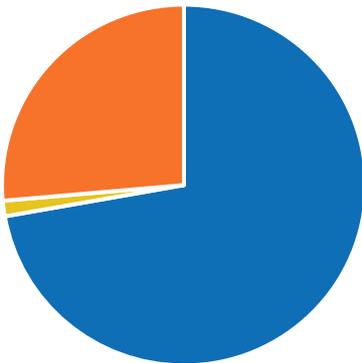
As it is now, ISO1 can be considered a successful tool:

- I fully agree (25)
- I agree, but it needs further development (51)
- I fully disagree (0)



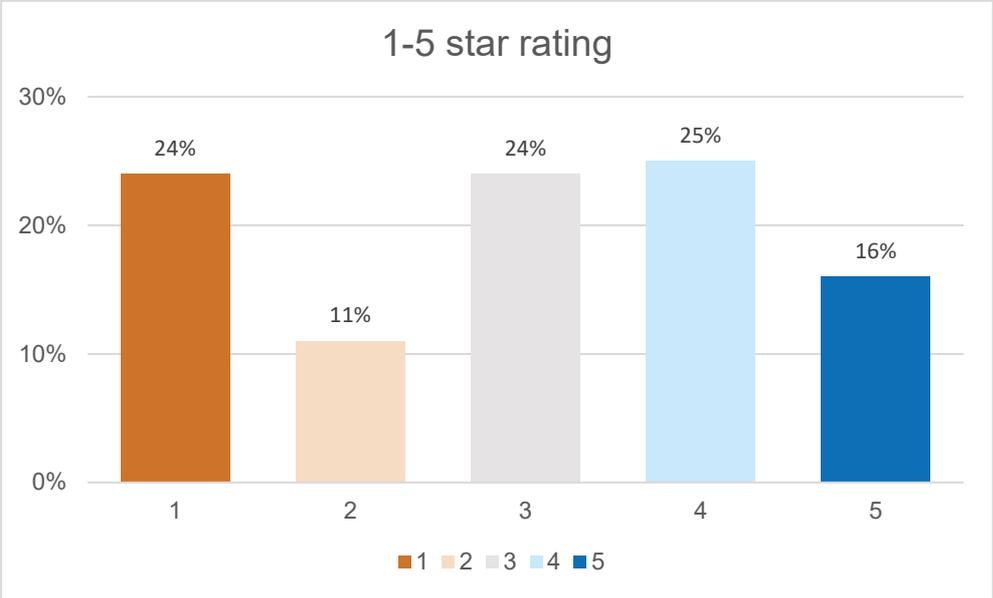
ISO1 shall be given more strategic weight and visibility in the future

- I fully agree (52)
- I am not sure yet (1)
- I dsagree (19)



Question 1, star rating 1-5

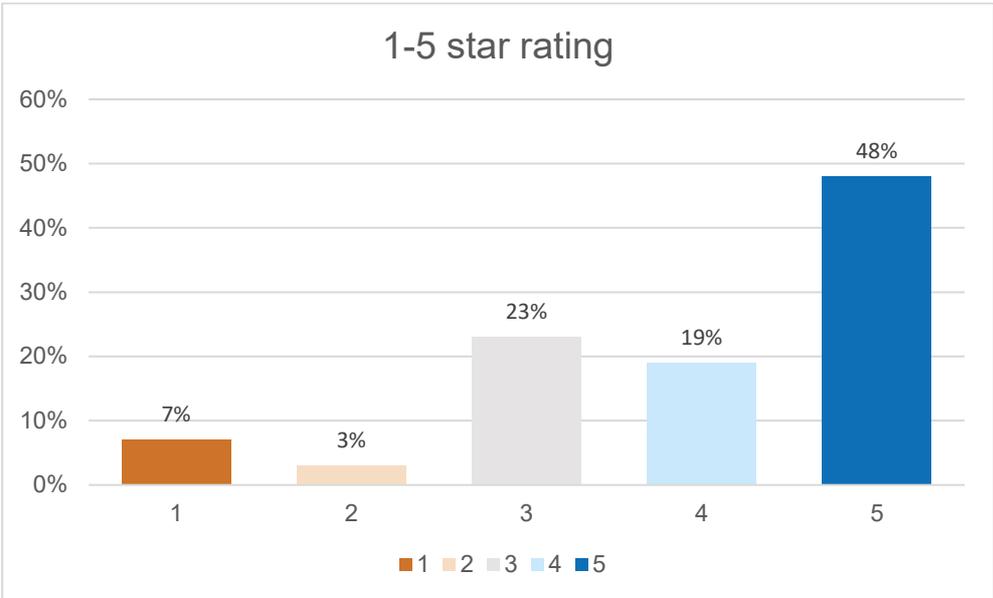
Transnational programmes could see ISO1 as sole priority if further developed (incl. piloting, testing in thematic fields, plus possibility for investments).



Average value 3 | 63 votes.

Question 2, star rating 1-5

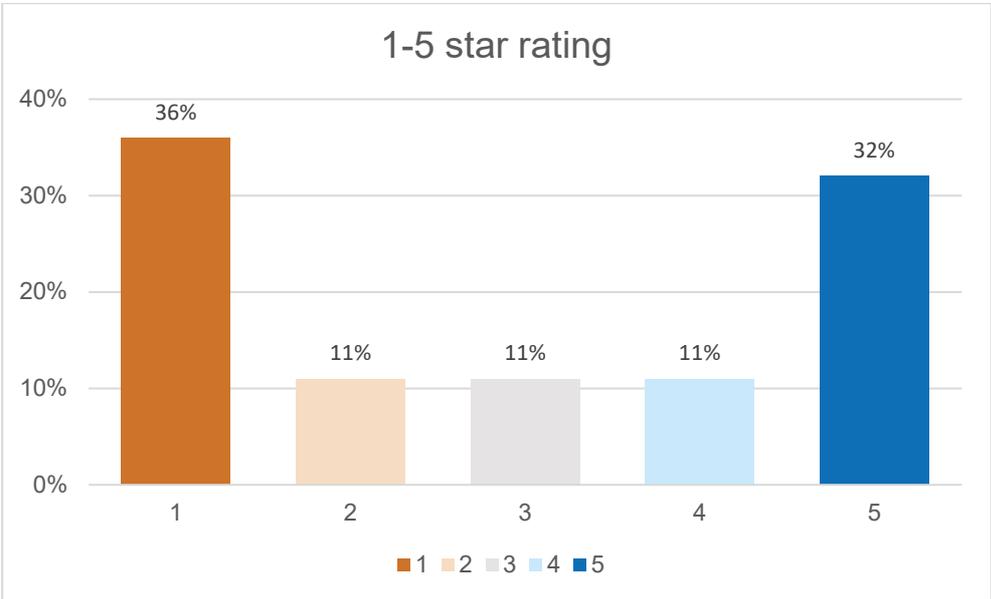
ISO1 shall be elevated to the level of a Policy Objective in the future.



Average value 4, 69 votes.

Question 3, star rating 1-5

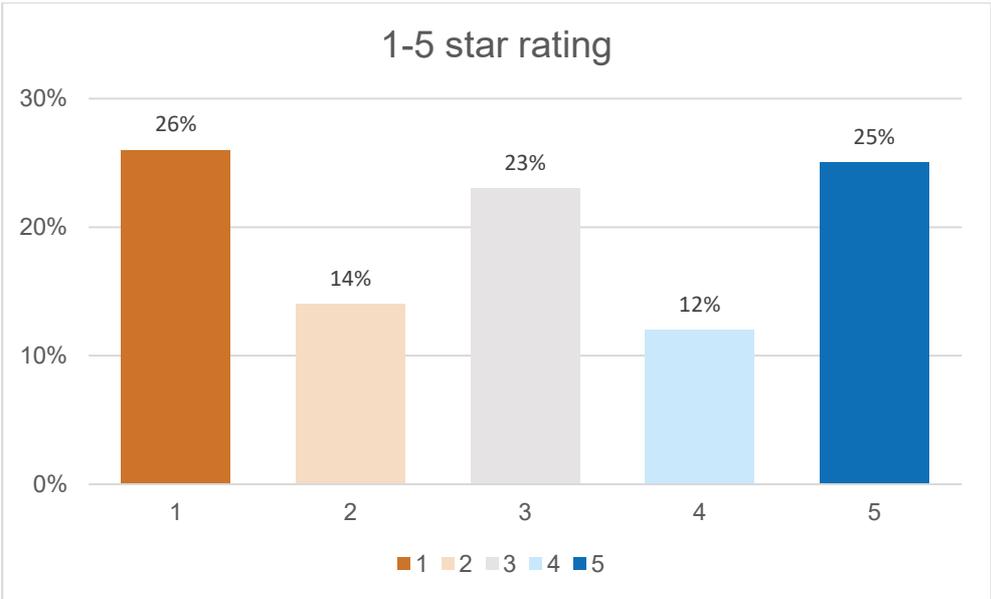
It could even become mandatory for Interreg programmes to select ISO1 as a governance priority. It could become an umbrella to all programme specific objectives



Average value 2.9, 73 votes

Question 4, star rating 1-5

Future Interreg programmes should be designed with a view on how Cross Border Public Services (CPS) could be established in the long run, with short- and medium-term actions to be implemented through an Interreg project.



Average value 3, 65 votes

Question 5, open comments

Is there any point that had not been discussed and that you would like to mention regarding the future of ISO1?

ISO 1 should be addressed mainly by Interreg Europe. That will give the opportunity to cooperate among the strands and build and use the capacities for the theme. That's a real umbrella	Enable Interreg programmes to choose all the possible areas of cooperation (not just one from the given list as it is now) and go beyond only governance (public institutions) including other stakeholders (like NGOs, tourism, and cultural or sport organizations).
ISO1 is relevant and suitable for helping to achieve cohesion policy aims in the framework of cooperation. We agree that it should be maintained and strengthened. However, the strengthening is not so much at the regulatory level (there we believe the current level is correct), but rather in terms of how programme bodies and beneficiaries understand and participate (so guidelines and learning). Specifically in relation to people-to-people / small projects under ISO, these are undoubtedly an important tool to reach new beneficiaries and engage with communities. However, their administrative complexity and time-consuming nature cannot be ignored. Measures should be put in place (SCOs, Technical Assistance) to ensure that the administrative requirements do not outweigh the benefits.	
Keep ISO1 as flexible and open as it currently is, as it truly enables to support projects adapted to the uniqueness of each cooperation area.	Thematic focus is very important for our stakeholders. ISO1 should not be imposed as the only priority.
It is difficult to understand all the possibilities that ISO1 offers. It would be useful to share experiences and best practices between programmes. Synergies between ISO1 and B-solutions could be interesting to overcome obstacles.	How do we better involve territories? Discuss which is the good kind of project to develop ISO1 (small scale projects). The link between ISO1 and MRS.
Simplification of the application procedure - see Small Project Fund - and exclusive use of TOS SCO's. To reduce admin burden for Governments, Small Towns, and Regions.	We have to explain better what ISO1 can be in the regulation. Not only the policy objective designed for Governance but as a flexible instrument that acts as a Jolly including all other priorities.
Diversity of borders is a fact, therefore, the ISO1 needs to provide flexibility in the approaches.	Priorities may change Post2027 - what is ISO1 potential to prevail as an Interreg specific objective if priorities change?
ISO1 proved to be a very useful tool to implement small projects. We need to continue exploring possibilities of using the potential of ISO1 and address simplification.	The general suggestions from the ECs side will be decisive (eg narrowing, POs to be considered). Keeping ISO1 seems beneficial, but specific communication is needed for clarifying the expectations/ opportunities.
Integrate bottom up and top-down approach in implementing ISO 1. E.g. Calls for people to people projects, but also negotiation procedures to select strategic projects with the help of MA staff and Steering Committee members. Flexibility is essential.	Importance of ISO1 to tackle specific issues of each territory which are not thematic based (support macroregional strategies, outermost coordination with third countries, cross border obstacles, capitalisation and embedding etc)
Border obstacles depend on existing legislation. Where the legislation framework does not exist (e.g., bilateral contracts), no project can definitely solve the problems.	ISO1 could provide an element of flexibility and adaptability and help inform other POs through its bottom-up approach.
Maybe ISO1 could be better defined in the Regulation; issues such as synergy and capitalization.	Identify and reduce „border obstacles“.
No % capping for ISO.	

34 responses, 32 respondents

Disclaimer: Cooperation can be complex, and while Interact's job is to make it easier, Interact cannot offer assurances on the accuracy of our pan-European information in any specific context.

Furthermore, understanding and knowledge evolves throughout the programming period. If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact us at communication@interact.eu

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