Giving a hand to autocrats: Are Russia's high-level visits for authoritarian durability?

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Abstract: The existing literature largely agrees that Russia and China actively bolster and protect authoritarian regimes as alternatives to liberal democracies. While empirical research predominantly focuses on economic and military aid as primary mechanisms, emerging studies on 'leader visits' reveal that great powers send visible, immediate, and robust signals of support to their protégés, especially against domestic and regional threats. Given that face-to-face interactions enable host leaders to more precisely discern their patrons' intentions, we argue that leader visits constitute a critical strategy employed by Russia in its global efforts to bolster authoritarian durability. Our empirical results demonstrate that although domestic instability generally deters foreign official visits, domestic instability actually increases authoritarian regimes' chances of attracting a Russian official visit. We also find that Russia's visits to authoritarian regimes experiencing domestic turmoil are linked to its power competition with the United States, particularly following a series of democratic revolutions in Russia's former protégés during the early 2000s. The findings underscore the strategic use of leader visits as a tool to bolster autocratic allies in times of global power competition, thereby advancing scholarship on authoritarian resilience. Policy implications include recognizing the geopolitical significance of diplomatic visits in signaling support for instable regimes and the need to incorporate such symbolic gestures into assessments of great power competition and authoritarian diffusion strategies.

Keywords: Russian leader visits, authoritarian regimes, signal of support, global power competition

Introduction

In late 2018, a wave of protests known as the 'Stop Bloody Shirts' movement erupted in Serbia, a country classified as an electoral autocracy by V-Dem since 2013. These protests were sparked by

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rising political violence and growing discontent with the authoritarian rule of President Aleksandar Vučić. By 2019, the protests had spread beyond Belgrade, signaling widespread opposition. On 17 January 2019, amidst this unrest, President Vučić hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was welcomed with great fanfare in a display of strong bilateral ties and mutual support (BBC, 2019). In the lead-up to his visit, Putin accused the United States and other Western nations of 'destabilizing' the Balkans, further highlighting the geopolitical dimensions of this high-profile meeting (Walker, 2019). Although the protests did not cease immediately, Putin's visit provided Vučić with a significant morale boost, and the large pro-Putin demonstrations held during the visit sent a powerful message to the opposition (Vuksanovic, 2020).

In West Africa, the political landscape experienced significant upheaval following military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned delays in transitioning to civilian rule, imposing measures such as border closures and the suspension of trade and financial transactions with Mali. At this critical juncture, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara capitalized on the vacuum, escalating its clashes with government forces and seizing Andéramboukane in March 2022. Simultaneously, Tuareg rebels reignited hostilities against the Malian government, further exacerbating the fragile security environment. Against this backdrop, Russia deepened its involvement by not only deploying Wagner Group mercenaries and defending the Malian junta in international forums but also sending Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Mali in February 2023. During his visit, Lavrov pledged continued support and dismissed Western criticisms regarding human rights violations (Diallo, 2023).

The cases of Serbia and Mali clearly demonstrate that Russian leaders respond to domestic instabilities in authoritarian regimes by visiting their incumbent rulers. This raises an important

question: what is the connection between instabilities in authoritarian regimes and great power visits to those regimes? External support for regimes facing instability can take various forms, including energy subsidies, loans, arms donations, troop deployments, the dispatch of advisors, advocacy in international platforms, and diplomacy (Yakouchyk, 2019: 153). These tools, however, are rarely studied quantitatively in the context of authoritarian-to-authoritarian support, leaving a significant gap in understanding the global resilience of authoritarian regimes (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Available quantitative studies aiming to understand Russia's and China's support for authoritarian rules have disproportionately focused on the effect of regime type on Chinese foreign economic aid and have found no robust evidence (Broich, 2017; Dreher et al., 2022). With a broader perspective, Bader (2015) looked at multiple mechanisms of support, including leader visits, and found slight support for China's inclination toward authoritarian regimes. The scarcity of such quantitative studies stems from the difficulty of gathering reliable data on authoritarian great powers. Unlike Western great powers, which more openly use material support for regime change and consolidation, authoritarian great powers often operate with far less transparency (Dreher et al., 2022; Wang and Stone, 2023).

For Russia, economic tools are seldom utilized due to its own economic hardships, and a lack of transparency has made it challenging to track Russia's economic aid over time, resulting in limited quantitative studies on the topic (Asmus, Fuchs, and Müller, 2018). Similarly, Russia's military assistance and troop deployment are not easy to track. Therefore, Russia's support for authoritarian resilience and diffusion is largely interpreted through a qualitative lens (Tolstrup, 2009; Cameron and Orenstein, 2012; Vanderhill, 2013; Yakouchyk, 2019). The limited body of empirical research aiming to ascertain Russia's role in authoritarian resilience focuses on linkages to Russia—encompassing trade, migration, diplomatic ties, geographic proximity, and defense pacts. These

studies conclude that such linkages significantly reduce the likelihood of autocratic collapse (Tansey, Koehler and Schmotz, 2017; Schmotz and Tansey, 2018; Gilbert and Mohseni 2018; for an opposite finding see, Melnykovska et al., 2012). However, these linkages do not conclusively prove that Russian leaders intentionally work to maintain and strengthen authoritarian regimes abroad (Tansey, 2016: 34). A clearer elucidation of the mechanisms through which Russia exhibits support for the stability of such regimes is needed.

To this end, it would be beneficial to investigate whether Russia acts specifically when the stability of non-democratic regimes is threatened. In this regard, leader visits are particularly noteworthy as they are more observable and quantifiable than other forms of external support provided by authoritarian powers to their allies. Leader visits from great powers are not only comparatively easier to track, but they also serve as a strong and direct signal of support for incumbents in nations facing domestic challenges (Tansey, 2016: 70-71). Unlike other forms of material support, leader visits, as a form of symbolic capital, are less costly, which is particularly important for great powers experiencing economic difficulties at home. For these reasons, we examine Russian leader visits to ascertain whether there is a Russian inclination toward authoritarian regimes when countries face domestic instabilities. We define domestic instability in measurable terms as the occurrence of events that challenge the resilience of the incumbent regime, with particular emphasis on the distinct nature of these events across different regime types (see Online Appendix for further details). By linking Russian leader visits with Russia's support for autocrats, our model reveals that authoritarian regimes are more likely to receive visits during periods of instability compared to democracies during the period between 2009 and 2020. This suggests a potential inclination in Russia's foreign policy toward supporting authoritarian regimes when they face domestic challenges.

Our research contributes to three key areas of literature. First, while the external support of authoritarian regimes is an expanding field of study, the non-Western backing of these regimes—particularly by Russia—has yet to be thoroughly examined empirically. Second, the existing literature disproportionately emphasizes the material support of authoritarian regimes, resulting in a gap where symbolic support remains under-researched. For example, McManus and Nieman (2019) found that Russia and China prefer forming alliances and conducting military exercises over making foreign visits when supporting their protégés. Lastly, the current scholarship demonstrates a growing interest in deciphering the dynamics of an emerging non-Western order. High-level leader visits serve as a critical lens through which to observe the relationships between non-Western great powers and their smaller client states within this new framework. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: the first part examines the connections between Russia's interest in autocratic survival in smaller states and provides some clarifying examples for these connections; the second part details how great power visits can support incumbents facing domestic instability; the third part clarifies our data and method, detailing dependent and independent variables. Finally, we present our results and offer some concluding remarks.

Russia and authoritarian regimes

Do Russian leaders care about authoritarian durability in foreign countries? Do Russia's foreign policy interests align with the persistence of authoritarian survival? These questions require us to analyze the direction of Russian foreign policy and to place Russia's prioritization of authoritarian survival within this wider context. In the literature, Tsygankov (2010; 2021) suggests examining widely cited Westernist, statist, and civilizationist schools of thoughts. Korolov (2019) underlines balancing and hedging. Götz (2019) offers a neoclassical realist explanation. Svarin (2016)

suggests the geopolitical space discussion. Ellison (2006) focuses on Russian multilateralism. Malinova (2019) brings Russia's 'pivot to the East' into the discussion. Strycharz (2022) touches upon the changing role of Russian foreign policy, and Clunan (2018) scrutinizes Russia's eventual exit from the liberal world order, among others. Despite differences in this rich literature, the majority of scholars agree that Russia's apparent turn from the West to an independent and aggressive foreign policy occurred following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

Within its sphere of influence, where the authoritarian turn found its strongest expression after the Russo-Georgian War, Russia treats former Soviet states as semi-sovereign, reflecting its experience during the Soviet era. Since 2008, Russia has actively opposed international democracy promotion efforts in its nearby geography and has weakened OSCE election monitoring, creating its own monitors to validate elections in various countries (Ambrosio, 2016). Russia's involvement in elections in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova showcases its support for authoritarian regimes through tactics like increasing incumbents' electoral chances, deterring defection, and suppressing the opposition (Ambrosio, 2016; Tolstrup, 2009; Silitski, 2005). Uncertainty in election outcomes increases the likelihood of Russian support, as it enhances the perception of the incumbent's vulnerability and the potential impact of intervention (Tolstrup, 2015). This approach serves Russia's domestic interests by maintaining control over its own authoritarian regime, supporting its regional interests by preventing external interference in nearby geographies, and defending its international interests by countering Western influence. Therefore, Russia's policy toward its post-Soviet neighbors and outside states often involves interactions with incumbent authoritarian rulers. Russian leaders are compelled to support these incumbents to ensure their retention of power. Vanderhill (2013: 75) argues that for Russia, 'survival of autocracy at home increasingly depends upon the failure of democracy abroad.' Similarly, Tolstrup (2014: 244) suggests that

democratization in Russia's near abroad and beyond 'was poison to the increasing authoritarianism that characterized Putin's Russia.'

Following the same logic, Russia's presence outside its sphere of influence also enables it to challenge the Western-dominated global order. By aligning with non-Western states and challenging Western norms, Russia positions itself as a counterweight to Western hegemony. In essence, Russia's foreign policy adopts a traditional Westphalian approach outside its sphere, challenging the post-Westphalian premises of the Western international order. The agenda for differentiating Russia from the West has coalesced around the concepts of state sovereignty, regime security, and strong states (Keating and Kaczmarska, 2019). This agenda was shaped by a number of factors, including the perceived threat of Western-backed regime change in the post-Soviet space and the Arab Spring, as well as Russia's desire to assert its influence as a great power. Russia has offered political, financial, diplomatic, and often military aid to bolster or reinstate authoritarian regimes in Eurasia, the Arab world, several African countries, and Venezuela, to name a few. Russia's agency to support autocratic regimes fits the definition of autocracy 'bolstering or protection' suggested by Tansey (2016, 36; See also Ambrosio, 2016). Russian President Vladimir Putin underscored and legitimized this approach by stating: 'Today in the world new centers of influence and models of growth are emerging, new civilizational alliances and political and economic associations are being formed. (…) But each association has the right to function according to its own ideas and principles that correspond to their cultural, historical, geographical features' (Quoted in Lewis, 2020).

As argued in the literature, Putin has also identified a distinct sub-order in the multipolar world that consists of stable autocracies aligning with the Russian political regime. The motivations

behind supporting this sub-order are maintaining control over Russia's periphery, countering Western influence, promoting Russia's political system, ensuring incumbent power retention in aligned states, preventing democracy abroad, and projecting Russian power in a multipolar world. This is not only about Russia's great power role but also a concern about its own survival outside the Western liberal order. Whether it is in Russia's near abroad or beyond it, Russian foreign policy prioritizes authoritarian survival in aligned states. This duality in Russian foreign policy results in a totalistic approach to imposing and consolidating authoritarian stability in the post-Soviet geography, while pursuing regime support and maintenance outside its nearby sphere of influence. Russian leader visits reflect this priority of authoritarian survival in a consistent manner.

The poster child of Russia's authoritarian savior role in the post-Soviet space is Belarus. On November 26, 2020, Russia's foreign minister visited Belarus to pressure President Alexander Lukashenko to adhere to agreements with the Kremlin and expedite constitutional reforms, aiming to quell a political crisis stemming from prolonged protests (Reuters, 2020). Following the August 9, 2020 presidential election, which protesters alleged was rigged, Lukashenko faced demands to resign. During a meeting with Putin on September 14, 2020, Lukashenko pledged to reform Belarus's constitution (Aljazeera, 2022). Lukashenko's political adversaries criticized his proposed reforms as an attempt to delay political action. Today, these reforms have yet to be implemented. Since this meeting, Lukashenko has obtained a crucial US $1.5 billion loan from Moscow, which has provided him with essential political backing to maintain his position. Lukashenko has openly acknowledged the importance of Russian support for the stability of his rule in Belarus (Walker, 2020). Belarus' landlocked status limits its strategic choices. It is heavily dependent on Russia for energy, relying on Russian fuel to fill pipelines that supply oil and gas to Europe. Notably, the northern branch of Russia's Druzhba pipeline traverses Belarus, transporting

crude oil to a Latvian Baltic seaport and to Germany and Poland (Chadwick and Long, 2023). Additionally, Belarus-Russia defense industry collaboration, particularly the production of spare parts for weapons systems, generates significant revenue for Belarus. Despite calls for assistance from international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, President Lukashenka has remained defiant in his refusal. He has also dismissed criticisms from Western human rights advocates, viewing them as attempts to undermine his authority and sovereignty (Hancock, 2006). Instead, Lukashenka has actively pursued closer ties with Russia, embracing both its economic support and its influence over security and policy decisions. Russia has prioritized stability over democratic practices in Belarus, enabling the authoritarian regime to maintain power by suppressing dissents and the opposition.

Another example of Russian support for authoritarian survival—this time outside its nearby geography—is Myanmar. Following Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Min Aung Hlaing, it was reported in the state-run *The Global New Light of Myanmar* (2022) on 3 August 2022 that 'Russia and Myanmar have 'plans of them to ally as permanent friendly countries and permanent allies, situations of governments of Russia and Myanmar to manage their internal affairs without external interference.' Notably, Lavrov stressed that 'the Russian government was 'in solidarity with the efforts aimed at stabilizing the situation in the country,'' echoing the junta's euphemism for its efforts to suppress widespread resistance to its rule (Strangio, 2022). The 2021 Myanmar coup presented Russia with a strategic opportunity to enhance its influence in the region. While other major powers condemned the coup, Russia emerged as a staunch supporter of the military junta, known as the State Administration Council (SAC). This enabled Russia to exploit Myanmar's isolation and secure access to lucrative arms sales and energy supply deals. Russia's support for the SAC has been unwavering, with Moscow being the only major power to endorse

the junta's actions. Conversely, Myanmar expressed solidarity with Russia during its invasion of Ukraine, providing military assistance to Moscow's forces (Strangio, 2022). SAC Chairman Min Aung Hlaing has undertaken several official visits to Russia, underscoring the importance Russia holds in Myanmar's foreign policy. These visits have been instrumental in showcasing the junta's perceived international legitimacy and strengthening bilateral ties. Hlaing has repeatedly praised Russian President Vladimir Putin, expressing gratitude for Moscow's support, including the provision of the Russian-made COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik (Storey, 2023).

Russia has actively engaged with regional organizations to bolster Myanmar's position internationally. Myanmar has become a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and is poised to apply for formal membership in the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) grouping. Moscow and Naypyidaw have also collaborated in areas that buttress their respective authoritarian rule. Russia supports SAC's plans for legislative elections and aligns with Myanmar's designation of anti-junta resistance fighters as 'terrorists.' In a move to combat international criticism, Russia's Sputnik news agency, a state-run entity, has established a content-sharing partnership with *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, which serves as Myanmar's official mouthpiece (Storey, 2023). Russia's unwavering support has provided Myanmar with a lifeline in confronting two significant challenges: suppressing anti-SAC resistance forces and tackling its energy crisis. Moscow's assistance has bolstered the junta's efforts to keep control and mitigate the impact of international isolation, namely maintaining the authoritarian regime of the junta-led government.

Domestic instability and great power visits

The study of external factors influencing regime stability has primarily centered on the impact of foreign aid (Licht, 2010). Many studies have analyzed the effects of economic assistance from diverse donors (e.g., the United States, China, Russia), while the examination of military aid has primarily been confined to the U.S. case, due to the paucity of data from non-democratic great powers (Heurlin, 2020). In contrast, the literature exploring 'frontstage signals' of support, such as high-level leader visits, is relatively nascent and includes fewer studies (Balcı, 2024: 11-12). McManus (2018) finds major power leader visits to their protegees have deterrence effect on regional rivals. Lee and Kim (2024; see also Kim, 2024) note that U.S. leaders are more likely to visit their military allies, particularly when those allies are engaged in militarized disputes that pose a threat to the incumbent leader. Looking at autocratic durability, Bader (2015) investigates the consequences of visits by Chinese leaders and concludes that they do not affect the probability of regime survival in autocratic countries. McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017) provide a more nuanced analysis by evaluating the impact of the visiting leader's regime type, discovering that visits from democratic great power leaders could intensify internal opposition in undemocratic host nations. Malis and Smith (2021) demonstrate that hosting or visiting the U.S. president is associated with a substantial reduction (51–70%) in the likelihood of being removed from office.

The presence of a foreign dignitary from a great power can significantly bolster the durability of an incumbent regime amid domestic unrest. Such visits entail significant investments by great power leaders, both in terms of time and reputational risk. Despite these potential drawbacks, great power leaders may engage in such visits after carefully weighing the perceived benefits against the potential reputational costs. When a great power leader visits a country experiencing unrest,

they provide a crucial pillar of support for the incumbent regime. This external validation can significantly boost the incumbent's resolve, imbuing them with a sense of legitimacy and confidence (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016: 1). This enhanced resolve emboldens incumbents to take decisive action against domestic opponents, comforted by the backing of a powerful ally. Furthermore, a great power's visit conveys a clear message of support for the incumbent, effectively increasing the potential costs of a regime takeover (McManus and Yarhi-Milo, 2017: 714; Malis and Smith, 2019: 483). This signal deters opponents from actively pursuing their ambitions, as they recognize the potential for resistance from both domestic and international actors. Consequently, the incumbent's position is strengthened, rendering it more formidable for rivals to challenge their authority. Lastly, the selective engagement of external powers in domestic affairs can significantly influence power dynamics within the host country (Smith, 2009). Foreign visits from powerful nations offer tangible support and recognition to the incumbent regime, effectively tipping the balance of power in their favor. This external support can serve as a stabilizing force, reducing the likelihood of domestic unrest or political instability.

Given the relationship between great power support for authoritarian regimes and visits by great power leaders to authoritarian countries facing domestic unrest, it might be assumed that great power leaders prioritize visiting authoritarian countries experiencing domestic unrest. However, this assumption overlooks the reputational costs associated with visiting a leader who can be potentially removed from office (Malis and Smith, 2021: 242). Consequently, great power leaders prefer to conduct visits with leaders whose office is more secure. To account for this deterrence effect, we exclude high-risk violent instability events, particularly in authoritarian regimes, from our analysis. In contrast, leadership changes in democracies resulting from violent demonstrations, such as riots, do not impose the same reputational costs on visiting leaders as similar events leading

to leader change in authoritarian regimes. This explains why US leaders spend more time touring NATO allies especially during their security crises to signal reassurance (Lee and Kim, 2024). In authoritarian contexts, such changes are perceived as regime failures, making visits more politically risky for foreign leaders. Therefore, we employ a more nuanced definition of instability to assess its impact on the likelihood of Russian leaders visiting authoritarian regimes (See Online Appendix).

The risk of the incumbent's removal, however, does not automatically deter a great power's support. For instance, when Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza DeBayle faced increasing opposition in the early 1970s, high-ranking US officials ceased visits to Nicaragua. However, the US continued to provide bilateral aid and covert assistance. This indicates that US leaders aimed to avoid public displays of support, likely due to normative concerns among US voters regarding democracy and human rights, which could potentially provoke domestic backlash (Malis and Smith, 2021: 246). Faced with domestic constraint, the US leaders continued to support the Somoza rule but with alternative instruments of support. Although material assistance represents a costlier form of support, it allows US leaders to escape from the domestic cost (McManus and Yarhi-Milo, 2017). In contrast, leaders of authoritarian great powers, such as China and Russia, face no such domestic constraints and, therefore, do not shy away from supporting incumbents who suppress domestic opposition. For a long time, China and Russia promote regime stability as opposed to human rights and democracy. This normative difference reduces the perceived risk for Russia and China of supporting oppressive regimes. Consequently, they can provide less costly forms of support to incumbents facing domestic instability.

In supporting their allies, great powers have alternative options such as troop deployment, material aid, and public statements of support (McManus and Nieman, 2019). A public statement of support, without an accompanying visit, incurs minimal cost and, therefore, can be perceived as routine in relations. Consequently, it conveys a muted endorsement of the incumbent, mitigating its potential deterrent effect on challengers. Material aid can save great power leaders from reputational costs, but this comes with some disadvantages. Namely, in authoritarian regimes, material aid does not always soothe domestic unrest; rather, it can sometimes fuel further unrest (Heurlin, 2020). Unlike direct and immediate leader visits, off-stage signals such as economic and military aid take time to deliver and may be subject to diverse interpretations. When authoritarian leaders face mounting domestic unrest that threatens their regime's survival, they require swift and direct support from their great power allies. Troop deployment is a very clear and direct signal of support, but it is extremely costly, making it a rare occurrence. Unlike the alternatives, visits by great power leaders are not only cost-effective but also convey a direct and clear signal of support for the incumbent (Malis and Smith, 2021: 243). Unlike the United States and China, Russia lacks significant economic capacity, motivating Russian leaders to use cost-effective instruments (Tolstrup, 2015). Consequently, we assume that Russian leaders instrumentalize high-level foreign visits as a cost-effective means to support authoritarian regimes against their own domestic threats.

Data and model

In this section, we outline the data and methodology employed to investigate the determinants of Russian high-level visits to foreign countries. First, we define and discuss the dependent variable used in the analysis. Then, we provide an explanation of the independent variables and control measures. Finally, we present the statistical model used to test our hypotheses.

Dependent variable

To explore the Kremlin's intention[1] to protect authoritarian regimes from domestic threats, we examine high-level Russian visits to foreign countries. High-level leaders are individuals with symbolic power capable of conveying Russia's support for the visited leader. Russian presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers, for instance, possess the capacity to demonstrate the Kremlin's solidarity with these leaders. Although foreign ministers hold secondary importance compared to presidents and are primarily tasked with managing routine foreign relations, their visits still attract significant media attention and send a strong signal observable by both incumbents and their opponents (for an illustrative case, see the Online Appendix). Since Russian leaders visit foreign nations for various purposes, it is incorrect to interpret all visits as the same. Visits for multilateral purposes, for instance, should not be considered as signals of support to the visited country's leader. While some studies may categorize visits with multilateral character as official if they include a concurrent meeting with the host leader, we treat such interactions as routine. Consequently, our analysis strictly focuses on official visits, which unambiguously convey a message of support for the incumbent. Our dependent variable is thus defined as official visits by Russian high-level leaders exclusively aimed at visiting the target nation, with no other underlying purposes.

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[1] Foreign visits often serve multiple purposes, both explicit and implicit, making it challenging to disentangle their various objectives. For instance, Russian leaders may publicly express support for a regime during a visit, while their underlying goal could be to leverage the situation for greater concessions from the host state. We prioritize the former explanation for two key reasons. First, securing concessions is contingent upon the survival of the regime. Second, the dynamics of global power competition drive great powers to ensure the resilience of their allies (Balci, and Yolcu, 2023). Furthermore, case studies, such as Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2004, suggest that Russia's primary intention is to bolster authoritarian regimes rather than pursue short-term economic interests in certain contexts (Tansey 2016, 36).

To assess our hypothesis, we compiled the Russia Visits dataset—the first comprehensive collection of data on visits undertaken by Russian leaders.[2] This data was collected from a variety of sources, providing a comprehensive overview of official, goodwill, multilateral, public, and private visits by Russian presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers from 1991 to 2023. This dataset includes visits to all United Nations member countries, excluding Russia, and also accounts for visits to Palestine and the Vatican (Holy See), which are not UN members. Data collection involved meticulous gathering from six distinct sources to ensure both complementarity and corroboration: 1) Presidential visits (2000–2023) from the official Kremlin website, 2) Prime Minister visits (2008–2023) from the Russian Government's website, 3) Minister of Foreign Affairs visits (2003–2023) from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation's website, 4) the LexisNexis database for comprehensive news and information, 5) targeted Google searches using specific keywords related to leaders' visits, and 6) Wikipedia pages detailing leaders' foreign visits. To ensure the dataset's accuracy and reliability, each recorded visit was validated through an up-to-date link to the relevant supporting document and corroborated with a supporting record of each leader's visit. Given Russia's significance as a major international actor, we expect that news archives have comprehensively captured all visits, leading to minimal data loss for the pre-2000 period. We incorporated data on the date, duration, and purpose in addition to visiting actors. If the visit was part of a larger group visit, we also listed the order of the countries visited. For example, during President Putin's tour in 2004, Chile was the first country visited,

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[2] Before our study, McManus (2018) collected data on Russian presidential visits up to 2008. However, the replication file provided by McManus only included a dummy-coded version of these visits. In our dataset, we not only included visits by prime ministers and foreign ministers but also extended the coverage to 2022. Additionally, we categorized the visits into official, multilateral, and other types. Fortunately, official Russian websites, such as the Kremlin's website, provide detailed lists of these visits. Unlike McManus, who relied on search results from FBIS, Lexis-Nexis, and ProQuest Historical Newspapers databases, we primarily used official web pages documenting Russian visits. As a result, our dataset includes 143 visit-year cases for Russian presidents between 1989 and 1997, compared to McManus's 104 cases.

followed by Brazil, second, and then Portugal, third. To enable researchers to easily integrate this dataset into their analyses, we have coded the countries in accordance with the widely recognized Correlates of War standards.

Upon aggregating all visitation data, we developed a set of dichotomous variables to adapt the dataset for analysis with a probit regression model. Specifically, we defined 'Presidential Visit' as a binary variable that takes on the value of 1 if country c receives a presidential visit in year t, and 0 otherwise. Similarly, 'Prime Minister Visit' is coded as 1 if country c is the recipient of a prime-ministerial visit within the same timeframe, and 'Minister of Foreign Affairs Visit' is set to 1 following a visit by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs to country c in year t. Additionally, we introduced a binary indicator to capture any high-level official visit from Russia to country c in year t, consolidating instances of diplomatic engagement at the highest level. To ensure compatibility with our statistical model, this process necessitated certain data simplifications, particularly in cases where multiple visits occurred within a single year. For instance, Belarus was the destination for six official and two multilateral visits from Russia in 2018, including two presidential visits. Instances of multiple visits to the same country in a single year are rare, and therefore, they result in inflating the presence of '0' and '1' values in our panel data. To mitigate the effects of left skewness in our dependent variable distribution (see Figure 2 in Online Appendix) and to enhance the model's interpretative validity, we accepted a degree of data loss, prioritizing the accurate representation of high-level diplomatic interactions within the specified temporal framework.

Independent Variable(s)

To explore the motivations behind Russian visits in support of authoritarian durability, we mainly rely on the data provided by the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive (CNTS) (2023 Edition) (Banks and Wilson, 2023). CNTS uses assassinations, general strikes, guerrilla warfare, government crises, purges, riots, revolutions, and anti-government demonstrations as indicators of domestic instability in a country. Building on the approach of Malis and Smith (2021), we limit and disaggregate the CNTS instability event data to align with distinct regime types. This disaggregation is necessary because certain events serve as indicators of instability for authoritarian regimes, while they may reflect the health of democratic regimes. For instance, anti-government demonstrations are often seen as a sign of democratic vitality (Przeworski, 2019, 37), whereas in authoritarian contexts, such non-violent protests are symptomatic of political instability (Tolstrup et al., 2019). Our primary measure of instability is a binary variable that captures the occurrence of events associated with instability, differentiated by regime type. For authoritarian regimes, we include Anti-Government Demonstrations and General Strikes, while for democratic regimes, we focus on Purge, Riots and Revolutions, as reported in the CNTS data for a given year (see Online Appendix for further details). In addition to this binary measure, we employ a composite index that aggregates these instability incidents. Our third measure of instability is the Weighted Conflict Index calculated by the CNTS itself. To address instances where countries have no recorded instability events in the Weighted Conflict Index, we add a constant value of one (1) to all observations before taking the logarithm, ensuring the inclusion of all cases in the analysis. Unlike other studies that lag instability variables, we use contemporaneous measures, operating under the assumption that Russian visits are intended as an immediate response to instability.

Lagging these variables could obscure the prompt nature of these visits, which are likely designed to address emerging instability in real-time.

Our primary hypothesis posits that Russian leaders selectively engage with authoritarian countries that experience domestic instability. Thus, we include an interaction term between instability measures and regime type, positing that the effects of instability on high-level visits are conditional upon the regime type. We utilize the Regimes of the World (RoW) from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (Coppedge et al., 2023)[3] to measure the effect of regime type. Since RoW variable is ordinal, ranging from 0 to 3 (with 0 representing closed autocracies, 1 representing electoral autocracies, 2 representing electoral democracies, and 3 representing liberal democracies), we transform it into a binary variable. Specifically, we code all autocracies (0 and 1) as 1 and all democracies (2 and 3) as 0. This aligns the data with our model, as we aim to measure the extent to which domestic instability influences Russian leaders' propensity to visit, contingent upon whether the regimes facing instability are authoritarian. As we contend that domestic instability influences the frequency of high-level leader visits from Russia to an authoritarian government, we anticipate finding statistical significance in the interaction terms rather than in the regime type alone.

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[3] Alternatively, the 'Machine Learning Democracy Index' (MLDI) (Gründler and Krieger, 2021) provides a dichotomous classification of regime types that is highly useful for our purposes. Although MLDI is dichotomous, Polity scores, another common measure of regime type, are not. Fortunately, it is common practice to dichotomize Polity scores, classifying regimes with scores between 6 and 10 as democracies and those with scores between -10 and 5 as autocracies. The MLDI codes democracies as 1 and autocracies as 0; we reversed these codes in our analysis, treating democracies as 0 and autocracies as 1 to align with our main research question. We therefore use MLDI and Polity scores as robustness checks for our results based on RoW data. Results based on MLDI and Polity scores are included in Online Appendix (See Figure 3 and 4 in Online Appendix).

Controls

The literature on leader visits suggests that more populous, wealthier, and strategically important countries tend to attract a greater number of visits from great powers, including China and the United States (Kastner and Saunders, 2012; Lebovic and Saunders, 2016; Cavari and Ables, 2019; Wang and Stone, 2023). Consequently, we include population and GDP per capita data from the World Bank as baseline control variables in our model. For measuring the strategic importance of countries for Russia, we use membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a proxy. These countries are not only neighbours to Russia but they also have greater importance in Russia's grand strategies (Šćepanović, 2022; Ambrosio, 2017: 103). After accounting for these variables, we then explore two other potential determinants. First, we control for political alignment with the United States, assuming that a country's political alignment with the United States—Russia's key global rival—affects Russian leaders' travel decisions. To quantify U.S. alignment, we use UN voting distance data (Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten, 2009). Second, we posit that Russia as a great power places more importance on countries with significant influence in global affairs (Wang, 2022). We measure this through countries' non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council.

Model(s)

The main analysis is undertaken by employing the probit regression model given by:

$$\Pr\,(Y_{it} = 1) \; = \; \phi(\beta_0 \; + \; \beta_1 population_{it-1} \; + \; \beta_2 gdp_{it-1} \; + \; \beta_3 Strategic_{it} \; + \; \beta_4 Regime_{it}$$
$$+ \; \beta_5 instability_{it} \; + \; \beta_6 interaction_{it} \; + \; \beta_7 Controls_{it} \; + \; \gamma_t)$$

where the dependent variable $Pr(Y\_it = 1)$ represents the probability of Russian leaders making an official visit to country i in year t. The function $\Phi(\cdot)$ denotes the cumulative distribution function of the standard normal distribution. The term β_0 is the intercept of the model, whereas β_1, β_2, β_3, β_4, β_5, β_6 and β_7 are the coefficients corresponding to the predictor variables. The variable $population$ is defined as the natural logarithm of the population for country i in the previous year, $t - 1$. Similarly, gdp is the natural logarithm of the GDP per capita for country i in the year $t - 1$ and $Strategic$ indicates whether a country is strategically important to Russia in the year t.

Variable $Regime$ refers to regime type for country i in the year t, assigning a value of 1 to authoritarian regimes and 0 to democratic regimes. We assign 1 to authoritarian regimes so that the interaction term shows how the effect of instability differs between authoritarian regimes and democracies. The $instability$ variable represents the instability indicator for country i in the year t. We have developed three models based on different measures of instability: the first utilizes a binary indicator of the presence of any instability event; the second employs a composite index of selected instability indicators; and the third is based on the Weighted Conflict Index. For both the composite index and the Weighted Conflict Index, we apply the natural logarithm to their values. Finally, the term $interaction$ denotes the interaction term between the instability variable and the regime type for country i in year t.

In addition to population, wealth, and strategic importance, there are other potential determinants of Russia's relations with foreign countries. Therefore, we incorporate these additional determinants as mediating variables, resulting in three extended models. The term 'Controls' includes two variables: political alignment with the United States and non-permanent membership

in the UN Security Council of visited countries. Of these mediating variables, only political alignment with the United States is lagged by one year. We exclude all permanent members of the UN Security Council from our model, as we assume that visits by Russian leaders to the great powers do not have the same signaling effect as visits to smaller states. We also examine the period between 2009 and 2020, since the literature identifies the 2008 Russo-Georgian War as a turning point in Russia's foreign relations with the U.S.-led order. Finally, γ_t represents fixed effects for each year to account for global shocks or trends that might affect all countries similarly in a given year.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of our probit regression analysis, which seeks to elucidate the determinants of official visits by Russian leaders to foreign countries over a twelve-year period, from 2009 to 2020. The findings provide strong support for our hypotheses, indicating that Russian leaders are more inclined to visit larger, wealthier, and strategically significant nations. This is evidenced by the consistently positive and statistically significant coefficients for population size, GDP per capita, and CIS membership across all models, underscoring the robustness of these variables in influencing Russia's patterns of diplomatic engagement. The coefficient for regime type in Model 7 is positive but fails to reach statistical significance, suggesting that regime type alone does not decisively determine the likelihood of a visit during this period. However, when examining the earlier period from 1991 to 2008 (as shown in the Online Appendix), the regime type coefficient in Model 7 is negative. This contrast suggests a potential shift in Russian interests post-2008, particularly regarding domestic instability. Although the instability coefficient is not statistically significant in Model 7, this observed shift warrants further investigation, as it may

indicate a changing strategic calculus in Russia's foreign policy. This finding is particularly noteworthy in light of existing literature, such as Malis and Smith (2021), which suggests that increased security in a leader's position correlates with a higher likelihood of receiving visits from U.S. leaders.

Table 1. Determinants of Russian leader visits, 2009–2020.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Population	0.274**	0.269**	0.270**	0.274**	0.269**	0.272**	0.268**
	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.046)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.046)	(0.043)
GDP per Capita	0.382**	0.380**	0.387**	0.370**	0.368**	0.374**	0.366**
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.046)
CIS membership	1.893**	1.896**	1.885**	1.870**	1.875**	1.861**	1.829**
	(0.190)	(0.191)	(0.198)	(0.192)	(0.193)	(0.201)	(0.188)
Regime type	0.207	0.249	0.241	0.266	0.303†	0.303	0.454**
	(0.160)	(0.156)	(0.189)	(0.183)	(0.175)	(0.213)	(0.146)
Any instability limited	-0.121			-0.121			0.065
	(0.156)			(0.156)			(0.112)
Interaction 1 (Regime type x any instability limited)	0.375*			0.367*			
	(0.180)			(0.183)			
Instability composite		-0.146			-0.143		
		(0.215)			(0.215)		
Interaction 2 (Regime type x instability composite)		0.431†			0.420†		
		(0.241)			(0.242)		
Weighted conflict index			-0.007			-0.008	
			(0.020)			(0.020)	
Interaction 3 (Regime type x weighted conflict index)			0.029			0.028	
			(0.023)			(0.023)	
UNGA vote distance				-0.057	-0.052	-0.055	-0.065
				(0.099)	(0.098)	(0.099)	(0.098)
UNSC membership				0.038	0.047	0.037	0.029
				(0.139)	(0.138)	(0.140)	(0.139)
Constant	-8.816**	-8.724**	-8.825**	-8.585**	-8.507**	-8.615**	-8.507**
	(0.973)	(0.980)	-1.004	(0.975)	(0.986)	-1.005	(0.984)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,963	1,963	1,963	1,963	1,963	1,963	1,963
Log Likelihood	-644.099	-644.192	-646.122	-643.670	-643.814	-645.725	-646.267

| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,324.199 | 1,324.383 | 1,328.244 | 1,327.339 | 1,327.629 | 1,331.450 | 1,330.535 |

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01

Sum of coefficients for anyinstability_limited and interaction1 in Model 1: 3.644 (p-value = 0.056)

The interaction terms, which are central to our analysis, reveal that the effect of domestic instability on the likelihood of Russian official visits varies significantly by regime type. Specifically, the sum of coefficients for domestic instability and the interaction term in Model 1 (3.644, p = 0.056)[4] demonstrates a positive and statistically significant association between instability and Russian visits in authoritarian regimes. This finding suggests that domestic instability within authoritarian countries enhances the likelihood of receiving a visit from Russian leaders, in line with the hypothesis that Russia strategically supports authoritarian regimes during periods of domestic unrest. While the interaction effect remains statistically significant in Model 2—where instability is measured using a composite index that aggregates various instability incidents—the effect loses significance in Model 3. The loss of significance in Model 3 suggests that treating instability uniformly across both authoritarian and democratic regimes yields inconclusive results within our model. Figure 1 further elucidates this dynamic through a marginal plot of the interaction effect. For authoritarian regimes, represented by the turquoise line, the predicted probability of a Russian visit increases with the occurrence of instability. This pattern indicates that domestic instability in authoritarian states does not dissuade, but rather attracts, Russian diplomatic engagement. This finding suggests that Russia's diplomatic strategies are more closely aligned with authoritarian regimes, particularly in periods of domestic turbulence.

Incorporating the additional variables of political distance from the United States, as reflected in UN General Assembly voting patterns, and UN Security Council membership into Models 4–6,

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[4] Despite the statistical significance of this finding exceeding the conventional .05 p-value threshold, it remains close at .056 and comfortably falls within the more relaxed significance level of .1. Moreover, in our robustness test utilizing Polity scores, the p-value improves to .044.

we observe that neither variable achieves statistical significance. This outcome indicates that these factors do not exert a measurable influence on the destination of Russian visits, which challenges conventional expectations given the importance typically attributed to these indicators in international relations. Notably, the direction and statistical significance of the interaction coefficients in Models 1 and 2 remain largely consistent even after the inclusion of these additional variables, underscoring the robustness of the initial findings concerning the relationship between domestic instability and Russian diplomatic engagement in authoritarian regimes.
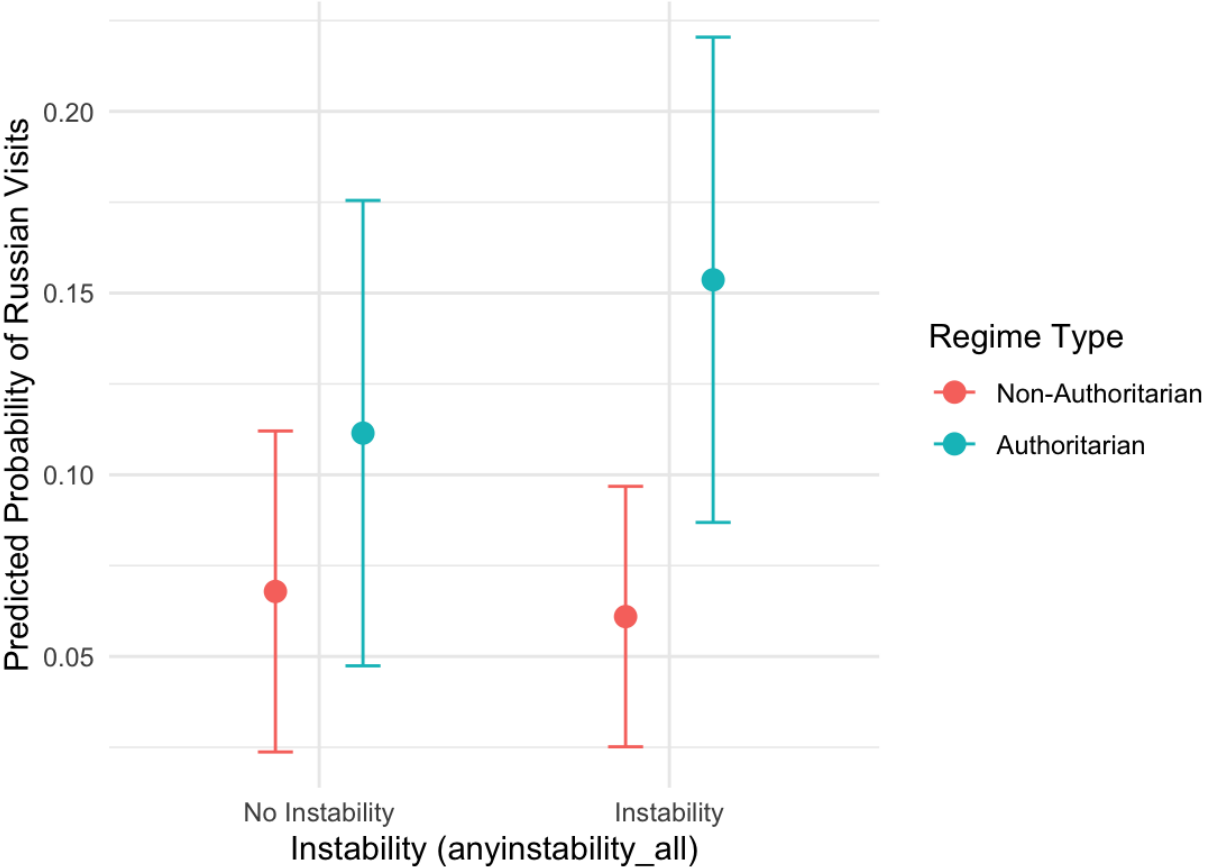

Figure 1. Marginal effects of domestic instability on the probability of Russian visits by regime type.

To enhance the reliability of our findings, we implemented three additional robustness checks (the results and margin plots of which are available in the Online Appendix). First, we confined our period of analysis to before 2009 to investigate the era when Russia did not have a defined policy of challenging U.S. regime change efforts. As anticipated, the effect of political distance from the United States on the probability of Russian visits gains statistical significance in Models 4–6, while the coefficients of the interaction terms lose their statistical significance in all relevant models. As countries become closer to the United States in voting alignment, the probability of being visited by Russia increases for the period before 2009. These two findings clearly underscore Russia's drift away from the West and policy of supporting authoritarian regimes following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Second, we geographically narrowed our dataset to focus exclusively on African nations, thereby eliminating numerous potential confounding variables not accounted for in our original model, such as geographical distance and the Soviet legacy. In this Africa-focused analysis, we excluded the CIS membership variable, as there are no CIS member states on the continent. Importantly, the direction of the coefficients across all models remains consistent, and the interaction term in Model 2 is statistically significant. Finally, we refined our dataset to include only official visits by Russian prime ministers and presidents after 2008. Although the direction of the coefficients remained consistent across all models and the interaction term in Model 1 was found to be statistically significant, the sum of coefficients for domestic instability and the interaction term in Model 2 loose its significance. Notably, in Model 7, the instability coefficient changes its direction when comparing to all visits. This may suggest that Russian prime ministers and presidents may be less inclined to visit countries experiencing significant instability, indicating a preference for avoiding high-risk environments.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to investigate whether Russia's propensity to visit and provide high-level support to foreign countries is affected by the level of domestic instability present in the visited countries. We argue that if Russia prioritizes the survival of authoritarian regimes as a part of its foreign policy, it is more likely to visit and support authoritarian regimes when they face domestic challenges. Our analysis leverages the relationship between the propensity of Russian leaders to visit foreign countries and Russia's strategic support for authoritarian regimes. The data on Russian visits to foreign countries constitutes a robust collection of information gathered from various sources, covering a period of three decades. Through our research, we show that domestic instability has a positive effect on the likelihood of Russia's official visits to authoritarian countries, suggesting that Russian leaders are more likely to visit and support authoritarian regimes when they face domestic threats. This supports the notion of a strategic inclination in Russian foreign policy toward authoritarian regimes, particularly when they are struggling to maintain stability.

Considering the decreased likelihood of Russian leaders' engagements with countries experiencing domestic challenges—irrespective of their democratic or authoritarian status—and a positive correlation with countries aligning with the US before 2009, trends in Moscow's visit preferences in the post-2008 period markedly indicate a strategic realignment of its foreign policy away from the West. This shift coincided with heightened security concerns stemming from perceived U.S.-led regime changes, NATO expansion, economic isolation, and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, among others. In this sense, our findings contribute to the understanding of how non-Western powers, in the case of Russia, support authoritarian regimes. While previous research has focused

on material support, such as aid and troop deployment, we highlight the importance of symbolic support through high-level leader visits. Unlike economic and military support, which demands significant resources, requires extensive preparation time, and may lead to risky endeavors, leader visits are a relatively low-cost, swift and credible signal of support. For authoritarian regimes facing domestic challenges, high-level leader visits from a non-Western great power provide external support, bolstering the resolve and legitimacy of the incumbent and increasing the cost of pursuing the opposition. Our study fills the gap in the literature by empirically demonstrating the intention of non-Western great powers to support authoritarian regimes. It also expands the toolkit of non-Western great powers, traditionally comprising economic aid, alliances, and troop deployment, by including high-level leader visits as a method for protecting fellow regimes. By shedding light on these understudied aspects of international relations, we contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussions on the mechanisms through which non-Western powers exert their influence in a world increasingly characterized by geopolitical competition.

The primary limitation of our study stems from the restricted set of variables employed in our analysis. Given our focus on recent periods and the challenges associated with accessing up-to-date datasets, our selection of variables was intentionally conservative, prioritizing those with the most current data available. For example, we avoided using Polity data (Marshall and Jaggers, 2020) in our main model due to its limitation of only extending to 2018 and its substantial missing data. Similarly, we utilized UN voting distance, not U.S. bilateral alliances, to gauge countries' closeness to the United States, due to the lack of alliance data coverage in the late 2010s. Future research could enrich our analysis by comparing findings with alternative measures of regime type and domestic instability (e.g., Armed Conflict Location and Event Data). This conservative approach in selecting independent variables was dictated by our inquiry's emphasis on the period

following 2009. Future studies have the opportunity to build on our efforts by including these and other updated datasets, potentially offering new insights into our findings. Additionally, the direct impact of the diplomatic visits on the survival of authoritarian regimes remains an open question. While the existing literature primarily focuses on the outcomes of such visits, our study instead prioritizes the critical question of which unstable countries receive these visits in the first place (Joyce et al., 2024). Our study does not compare leader visits with other forms of support for authoritarian regimes in crisis, such as statements of support or intelligence assistance. Examining statements of support is particularly important as they help clarify the intentions behind state visits. Future research that explores these two dimensions (survival effect and alternative tools) will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and mechanisms behind non-Western great powers' support for authoritarian regimes.

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