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SOME ASPECTS OF THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE BALKANS AFTER THE COLD WAR

The Balkan Peninsula has been in the range of the Russian influence for decades. Different aspects have defined the interests for greater involvement in the region: historical bilateral ties, religious and ethnic affiliation, security concerns, energy supply, etc. During the military conflicts in Europe and the Cold War, the Balkans had remained in the sphere of interest of the Soviet/Russian foreign policy.

After the end of the Cold War, the political, economic and security developments in the countries of the region, such as accession to EU and NATO, the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, the energy dependence, as well as the Russian internal developments, redefined the mutual relations,

The predominant Slavic population most Balkan countries has played an important role in history, and pan-Slavic ideas have remained alive throughout the political development in the region. The position of the Soviet Union

during the Cold War, as well as the Russian Federation's attitude towards the development in the 1990's, has shown that this region is of significant importance for the Russian policy in Europe. During Vladimir Putin's leadership, the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has gone through changes, which has been visible in its Balkans policy.

Energy and economy have become the new priorities for Russia in the Balkans, without abandoning the strategic geopolitical and security interests. The rise of the Turkish interest in the region additionally increased the need for adjustments in the post-Cold War political landscape. Shifting the United States' focus away from the Balkans has created new opportunities for Russia, and the stalemate in the EU accession of some Balkan countries has led to modifications in their foreign policy goals.

This paper examines Russia's influence in the countries of the Balkan region, its interests in this part of Europe, as well as its relations to other (dis)integration processes. The following questions will be analysed: What were the reasons for the Soviet involvement in conflicts on the Balkans during the World Wars and the Cold War? How did Russia react to the dissolution of Yugoslavia? What were the responses of Russian foreign policy to the EU and NATO enlargement by countries in the region? What are the circumstances of the Russian position regarding the independence of Kosovo? How does the energy issue relate to the bilateral relations with the Balkan countries? What theoretical assumptions can be used to explain Russia's policy in the region? Is Russia seeking to restore the balance of power established during the Cold War? What are the future prospects of the Russian influence in the Balkans?

| THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BALKANS

The importance of states as actors in the international system provided by the realist theory, as well as their rational behaviour, is one way to explain the involvement of Russia in the region. Is Russia trying to reclaim the position it had during the Cold War, using trade, energy and cultural instruments? Does Russian national interest prevail in this process, or does it also take into account the interests of the countries in the region? How do these actions influence the political situation in the Balkan countries?

The geostrategic importance of the Balkans determined the interest of the great powers in a greater involvement in the region, including the European states, Russia, as well as Turkey. Russia has been aspiring to gain access to the Mediterranean Sea for centuries, and predominance in the Balkans the easiest way to realize it. Helping the Slavic Orthodox peoples under the Ottoman rule only strengthened the motivation for greater involvement, a situation described

by some authors as “Russia’s historic mission to liberate and protect the little Slav brothers in the Balkans”.¹

These conditions would remain valid for Russia’s, i.e. the Soviet Union’s engagement in the region for most of the 20th century, even though its sustainability has been questioned by some Western intellectuals. For example, in 1934, Albert Mousset claimed that “the idea of Russian domination in the Balkans is only a historical memory”,² but at the same time he recognised that the so-called “Slavist ideology” was perceived as a danger to the European nations, and the word “Pan-Slavism” caused “many chancelleries to shiver” in the 19th and 20th century.³

Social constructivism partly explains the interest of the Russian Empire during the 19th and early 20th century, when Slavic identity was crucial for Russia’s interest in the region, and for the expectations of the Balkan peoples. An interesting example is the poem “The Eagle” by the Russian poet Aleksey Khomyakov from 1832, which sets the frame for the image of Slavic solidarity.⁴ Although periodical and never fully realised, Pan-Slavic ideology has been revisited whenever necessary for Russia to justify its appetites in the Balkans. Orthodox unity is another aspect, especially addressed at the times of religious oppression in the region.

The division of the Balkans into an Austrian sphere of influence (the Western Balkans) and a Russian one (the Eastern Balkans)⁵ was the starting point for greater involvement in the entire region. Supporting the independence of the Balkan nations in the 19th and 20th century, as well as communist cooperation before and during the Second World War, saw the Russian / Soviet influence strengthening.

Soviets seemed to be very satisfied with the spheres of influence agreed on at the end of World War II. The so-called Percentages agreement put the seal on Soviet dominance in the Balkans: in October 1944, Stalin and Churchill agreed to divide the spheres of influence: Yugoslavia 50-50; Bulgaria 75-25, Romania 90-10 in favor of the Soviet Union, while the Western Allies would get 90-10 in Greece. With this agreement, Greece “narrowly missed entering the Soviet orbit”, while Turkey “survived Stalin’s postwar territorial demands”.⁶

1 Langer W. L. (1928) Russia, the Straits Question and the Origins of the Balkan League, 1908-1912, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sep. 1928), pp. 321-363.

2 Mousset A. (1934) Slav Solidarity in the Balkans, *International Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (Nov. – Dec. 1934), pp. 772-791.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Poem “The Eagle”, Aleksey Khomyakov, <https://russian-poetry.com/orel-2/>

5 Bekich D. (1985) Soviet Goals in Yugoslavia and the Balkans, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 481 (Sep. 1985), pp. 81-91.

6 Brown J. F. (1984) The Balkans: Soviet Ambitions and Opportunities, *The World Today*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (Jun. 1984), pp. 244-253.

With this division, it seemed that the Balkans “powder keg” was finally under control, and that the Soviets would remain in control in the region. The Greek Civil War (1946-1949), in which one of the sides was indirectly supported by Yugoslavia and the USSR, was the last attempt to expand the sphere of influence, which ended with the defeat of the Greek communist army.

RENEWED INTEREST IN THE POST-COMMUNIST ERA

The Iron Curtain was spread right across the Balkans, with Yugoslavia as a gray area at the border between East and West. Although all the Balkan countries (except Greece) embraced communist ideology, Yugoslavia and Albania remained outside the Moscow-controlled area, and Romania showed signs of independence in its foreign policy. Their position showed that Soviet domination did not comprise the entire Balkans. According to some assessments, by their mutual agreements, these three communist Balkan states basically engaged in anti-Soviet defense cooperation.⁷ This shows that the Soviet supremacy began to weaken immediately after the war, a process which came to its end with the fall of the communism.

Geostrategic interests explain the interventions of great powers in ethnic conflicts,⁸ and ethnic conflicts on the Balkans were another opportunity for Russia to reveal its interest in the region. In the circumstances of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the immediate reactions of the Soviet leadership were in favour of maintaining the unity of the Federation. This was seen as a logical position, having in mind the possibility of a break-up of the multi-ethnic Union of Soviet Socialist Republics if they supported self-determination in the case of Yugoslavia. Personally, Soviet leader Gorbachev was a vigorous supporter of the cohesion and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia.⁹ Trying to maintain his authority on the international stage, he even tried to act as a mediator at the beginning of the conflict – an effort that did not produce any results.

Of far greater significance was the perception of the events in Yugoslavia as a precedent for the Russian Federation, which was also threatened by disintegration. This was connected with the concern that the Russian Federation, during its economic crisis, might also be torn apart by centrifugal forces. And finally, the Russians saw themselves in the same position as all the states whose integrity was threatened by armed separatist movements.¹⁰

7 Bekich (1985)

8 Carment D., James P. (1996) Two-Level Games and Third-Party Intervention: Evidence from Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans and South Asia, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sep. 1996), pp. 521-554.

9 Cohen L. (1994) Russia and the Balkans: Pan-Slavism, Partnership and Power, *International Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Autumn 1994) pp. 814-845.

10 Bonin P. (2001) The last reserves of the imagined Great Power. On the significance of the Balkans for Russian political and economic actors, *New Balkan Politics*, Issue 2, 2007.

Meanwhile, contacts were established between military officials and nationalist groups from Serbia and Russia, as well as semi-independent bilateral relations between the former Yugoslav and Soviet Republics, and, later mutual recognition of independence.¹¹ These developments, together with the internal transformation of the USSR, significantly changed the Soviet, i.e. Russian position.

The new Russian leadership under President Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev took a different stance: support for the independence of the Yugoslav republics, and cooperation with the European powers and the US in the efforts to stabilize the region. Kozyrev's liberal internationalist approach was based on the assumption that liberal states share common values, and that the international institutions have to play a key role in the international relations. Accordingly, Russia shared the West's interests and had to cooperate within the UN and the CSCE.¹² Internal political and economic difficulties prevented stronger demeanour on the international stage.

Yeltsin and Kozyrev faced serious pressure from the nationalist and communist groups at home, but they managed to stay on track. The accusations that Russia had betrayed its natural ally Serbia were common for Russian and Serbian hardliners. In addition, in May 1992, Russia voted in favour of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 727, which imposed sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (then Serbia and Montenegro). The expectations of the Serbian leadership had been that sanctions would not be imposed by the UN, exactly because of the special relations with Russia as a permanent SC member.

However, in order to change the image of the country and its leadership, Russia chose to align itself with the West and emphasise the role of the international institutions. In this period, Russia's policy in the Balkans was not competition or conflict, but rather cooperation with the other great powers by stressing the role of the UN. Thus, they demonstrated not only that Russia could not be ignored in search of a peaceful solution, but that it was crucial for any settlement in the Balkans. Had Russia decided to fully support the Serbian leadership, a UNSC resolution would never have been possible, and the developments might have taken a different turn.

At a later stage of the conflict, NATO acted without a SC resolution, but at the request of the UN Secretary General. Russia's reaction was furious, both official and public, but it could not do anything else at that moment. After the end of the war in Bosnia, Russia participated in the NATO-led IFOR and SFOR missions. Moscow showed signs of having "adopted a more assertive stance vis-à-vis

11 Cohen L. (1994) Russia and the Balkans: Pan-Slavism, Partnership and Power, *International Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Autumn 1994) pp. 814-845.

12 Headley J. (2003) Sarajevo, February 1994: The First Russia-NATO Crisis of the Post-Cold War Era, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Apr. 2003), pp. 209-227.

the West... designed to confirm Russia's great power status",¹³ but overall, its cooperation with the other international actors was satisfactory. Again, internationalist positions dominated Russia's foreign policy.

By adding the new members Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania (2004), Croatia and Albania (2009), as well as Montenegro (2017), NATO further strengthened the Western presence in the former Soviet sphere of influence. This was perceived as a challenge to Russia's security interests, but their choices were limited: while Balkan nations decided to join the Alliance, pro-Russian forces were significantly weakening during the 1990s. Russia's economic influence was weak, too, and Putin's international power not at its height.

The enlargement of the European Union included some Balkan states (Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia) as well, with the other ones striving for membership. Public support has remained on a high level, and alternatives are hardly even considered. Unlike the NATO enlargement, EU membership cannot be regarded as a threat to Russian security, but it still represents stronger relations of the Balkan nations with the European powers, whose interests may differ from Russian ones.

Another challenge for Russia was the NATO bombing on Yugoslavia in 1999, carried out without authorisation from the UNSC. This flagrant violation of international law sparked reactions in Russia, but again, the traditional Serbian ally could not do more. The arrival of Russian troops in Kosovo was only a short-term satisfaction for the Serbs.

In June 1999, an incident at Pristina airport brought NATO and Russia to the brink of a major crisis: Russian troops from Bosnia had arrived at the airport ahead of the NATO troops. NATO soldiers surrounded the airport, and General Wesley Clark gave the order to seize the airport by force. This order was not carried out, and later both sides agreed on handling the airport security together. Later, it was revealed that the situation had been much more serious: British general Mike Jackson was said to have replied to Clark: "I'm not going to have my soldiers be responsible for starting World War III".¹⁴ After the introduction of the KFOR mission, Russian troops participated in this NATO-led mission under a UN mandate until 2003.

Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008 and its recognition by the Western powers created another situation which was new to the international legal order, bypassing UN principles. The Kosovo case contributed more to consolidate Russia's anti-NATO stance than the Organisation's eastern

¹³ Headley J. (2008) *Russia and the Balkans: Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin*. New York: Columbia Press.

¹⁴ "How James Blunt saved us from World War 3", *The Independent Daily*, London, 15 November, 2010.

enlargement.¹⁵ Unlike in the 1990s, when Russia joined the other UNSC members in imposing sanctions on Serbia, the traditional alliance was maintained.

The new self-proclaimed state would not become a UN member, and its independence would continue to be disputed in the years to come. Russia's behaviour in the region in 2007-08 was fundamentally opportunistic: Moscow's goal was to weaken the authority of NATO, the US, and the EU, and the Balkans served as a convenient platform for this broader goal.¹⁶

Russia exploited the recognition of Kosovo to its own geopolitical advantage. To them, it was illogical for Kosovo to be recognized as an independent state, but not the Serbs' state in Bosnia.¹⁷ A visible consequence of the proclamation and recognition of Kosovo was Russia's action in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008: both republics were self-proclaimed, and Russia's intervention was not according to international law. Despite repeated calls for assistance from the Georgian leadership, the Western powers' reaction was limited to political statements.

Russia's unilateral action in the two Georgian breakaway republics was also an answer to the Western military and political actions in Kosovo, and it demonstrates the country's intention to maintain the role of a super power after the Cold War. This indicates the pragmatism of Putin-dominated foreign policy (although Dmitry Medvedev was holding the presidential seat at that time). Another region where Russia upholds its military presence is Transnistria in Moldova.¹⁸

| NEW INSTRUMENTS: OIL AND GAS

Apart from its political engagement, Russian influence is evident in the energy sector. Gas and oil are the last reserve of Russian Balkan policy.¹⁹ During the last decade, Russian companies have invested large sums in the Balkan energy sector. The Russian energy strategy in the Balkans is an integral part of the country's foreign policy in the region: *the first echelon* of advance.²⁰ According to the "Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030" adopted in 2010, "*The energy policy should be directed towards a change from raw material supplier to active participant on the global market, which is a task of strategic importance.*"

15 Baranovsky V. (2000) Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?, *International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Jul. 2000), pp.443-458.

16 Valasek T. (2009) *Is Russia a partner to the EU in Bosnia?* London: Center for European Reform.

17 Kumar R S. (2008) From Kosovo to Georgia: The US, NATO and Russia, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 36 (Sep. 2008), pp. 24-27.

18 Transnistria is a region of Moldova which proclaimed independence in 1990, officially not recognized by Russia. However, Moscow has a consulate in its capital Tiraspo, and 1200 Russian troops are still present in the region.

19 Bonin (2001)

20 Simurdic M. (2009) *Russian Energy Policy and the Balkans*, in Sixth Report Monitoring Russia Serbia Relations Project, Belgrade: International and Security Affairs Centre.

*This ensures Russia's energy security and its position as a stable and reliable partner of the European countries and the world community.*²¹

The geostrategic importance of the Balkans is once more taken into account by Russian policy-makers. An important characteristic of the region is its strategic geographic position at the crossroads of the main hydrocarbon transportation routes from energy-rich areas such as Russia, the Middle East, the Caspian, and Central Asia to industrialised and energy consuming areas such as Central and Western Europe.²² Oil and gas pipelines through the region are crucial for energy delivery to some parts of the European market. Furthermore, the region is related to “the ‘New Great Game’, i.e. the modern re-run of the struggle between Imperial Britain and Imperial Russia of the XIX century for influence in Central Asia”.²³

In 2007, President Putin reminded the Balkan nations of Russia's special interest in the region. In a speech in Zagreb, at the Balkan Energy Cooperation Summit, he emphasised that “*Russian relations with its partners in the Balkans have traditionally been based on mutual sympathy, common spiritual traditions, the closeness of our languages and cultures and a common history.* He dwelled on “*the project to develop the gas network in Macedonia and expand the gas pipeline network to Albania, Southern Serbia and Kosovo*”, which proves that this project was devised with a regional approach.²⁴ He also mentioned the \$1.5 billion investment by “Lukoil”, as well as the investments by “Gazprom”, “Transneft” and other Russian companies in the region.

The “South Stream” gas pipeline was supposed to be one of the largest investments in the region, aiming to ensure energy security in the region. The “Nabucco” pipeline, a US project backed by the EU, was seen as rival to “South Stream”, which once again illustrates the competition on Balkan grounds. The US position on this issue is determined by the desire to “promote energy diversification”, knowing that countries that are dependent on energy from sole suppliers are also politically dependent.²⁵ Starting from the realistic assumption of establishing a dominant position with the investment in the energy sector, Russia is also expecting political benefits.

The presence of Russia in the region will be significantly determined by the increasing importance of energy security, and its presence will be maintained long-term. “South Stream” should be considered together with the development

21 “Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030”, Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation, Moscow, 2010.

22 Ralchev S. (2012) Energy in the Western Balkans: A Strategic Overview. Sofia: Institute for Regional and international studies.

23 Simurdic (2009)

24 Vladimir Putin, Speech at the Balkan Energy Cooperation Summit, Zagreb, 24.06.2007, <http://archive.kremlin.ru> (accessed on: March 22, 2013).

25 Phillip Gordon, US Assistant Secretary of State, Remarks at the Atlantic Council, Nov. 13, 2012, <http://www.acus.org> (accessed on March 21, 2013).

of the North European Gas Pipeline, as both projects will significantly enhance Russia's importance as an energy supplier for the rest of Europe.²⁶

Bilateral relations with the Balkan countries are also experiencing adjustments. Serbia, for example, reaches out for Russian support whenever under pressure from the EU to make further concessions regarding Kosovo; the Republika Srpska also receives support from Russia in its disputes within the Bosnian Federation; Macedonia appreciated the support from the permanent UNSC member in the name dispute with Greece; Bulgaria changed its position regarding the support for Russian gas and oil pipelines on its territory, as well as the construction of a nuclear power plant by Russian companies; Greece flirts with Russia whenever treated inappropriately by the EU; etc. Notwithstanding, Balkan countries joined the Western powers in the wave of expelling Russian diplomats following the "Skripal case" in 2018.²⁷

Pragmatism prevails in the behaviour of the Balkan countries in their relations with Russia. Adjusting to realistic assumptions, national governments assess the cost and benefit from their bilateral relations with this international power while pursuing their European (and NATO) membership aspirations. Similarly, Russia's national interests are the primary reason for maintaining (and extending) its presence in South-Eastern Europe. Some elements of the theory of hegemonic stability may also be found. A relative withdrawal of the EU and the US from the region would open a window of opportunity for Russia to play the role of a dominant power, which would restructure the interaction among the Balkan countries.

| FUTURE CHALLENGES

Russia could be imperfect Europe; the best of Europe; or another Europe.²⁸ In all options, it stays heavily involved in the Balkan affairs. The Balkans remain an arena of East-West geopolitical rivalry, as it has been for centuries. Today's instruments of rivalry are not armies, but rather economic and political forces, such as control over energy pipelines and production, and its use for political rather than purely economic objectives.²⁹ After all, Russia will continue to pursue its national interests, trying to counter-balance the EU and NATO expansion in the former Soviet space.

An address by President Putin at a meeting with Russian ambassadors clearly defines his country's view of contemporary international relations: "*We are all*

26 Smith M. (2008) Russian Energy Interests in the Balkans, Shrivenham: Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, Advanced Research and Development Group.

27 Croatia, Albania, Romania and Macedonia expelled Russian diplomats in March 2018, while Greece expelled two Russian diplomats in July 2018, not related to the "Skripal case".

28 Baranovsky (2000)

29 Blank S. (2013) Russian Policy in the Western Balkans, Washington: Atlantic Council.

*the more worried when we see attempts by some actors in international relations to maintain their traditional influence, often by resorting to unilateral action that runs counter to the principles of international law. We see evidence of this in so-called 'humanitarian operations', the export of bomb and missile diplomacy, and intervention in internal conflicts."*³⁰

While some interpret contemporary Russia as largely accommodationist and non-threatening to the West, others perceive the Kremlin's objectives as expansionist and disrespectful of international rules.³¹ According to some authors, Russia's Balkan policy aims at "undoing the substance, if not the form, of the European settlement of 1989-99, a major component of which was the resolution of the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s", and "Moscow does all it can to block a resolution on the Bosnian and Kosovo issues and exploits ethnic animosities whenever it can".³² However, the need for stability in the Balkans is in the interest of Russia, too, with the final solutions for some cases being disputed. Different views on the ways of solving the Bosnian and Kosovo crisis do not mean that Russia does not want to resolve them.

"The Western Balkans is hardly a sideshow... they are a key area of geopolitical competition which we cannot afford to neglect".³³ Russia still sees a potential danger to be pushed out of the Balkans, while the EU and NATO are predominant by means of different political, economic and security arrangements. Some Russian analysts even see this as a part of Washington's plan to surround Russia.³⁴ However, since the end of the Cold War, we can notice a pattern of disengagement on all sides.³⁵

Russia might be the only major power that continuously maintains its interest in the region, while the US largely withdrew after the Clinton administration, and its European partners followed. Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, and Montenegro's NATO membership since 2017 demonstrate the West's intention to keep the Balkans in the focus. Nevertheless, domestic developments in some of the large EU member states and the overall opposition to further EU enlargement may endanger the long-term vision to fully incorporate the Balkans into the EU.

³⁰ Vladimir Putin, Address at the Meeting with Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives in International Organisations, Moscow, 09.07.2012, <http://eng.kremlin.ru> (accessed on March 22, 2013).

³¹ Tsygankov A. (2013) Contested Identity and Foreign Policy: Interpreting Russia's International Choices, *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 14, No. 1, March, 2013.

³² Blank (2013)

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Reljic D. (2009) *Rusija i Zapadni Balkan*, Belgrade: ISAC.

³⁵ Miller B., Kagan K. (1997) The Great Powers and Regional Conflicts: Eastern Europe and the Balkans from the Post-Napoleonic Era to the Post-Cold War Era, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Mar. 1997), pp. 51-85.

The “great power balancers”³⁶ leading Russia today will continue to try to expand its influence. The concept of spheres of influence is not unknown to the Russian leadership: “regions of privileged interests”, as Medvedev called them in 2008, are countries which Russia shares “special historical relations” with, and they are not limited to the neighbouring regions.³⁷

The Balkans have long had the image of a special sphere of Russian interest, and it will hardly dispose of this image any time soon.³⁸ Future prospects of Russia’s influence in the Balkans depend on certain political and economic developments: the final status of Kosovo, the speed of the European integration of the region, the success of its energy policy, the level of interest of other major powers in the region (especially Turkey), as well as the potential for other conflicts where Russia can interfere.

The significance of the Balkans for Russian foreign policy goals has not diminished, and opportunities opened with the absence of other players will be utilized. Unlike the liberal internationalist policy adopted by the Yeltsin government in the 1990s, Putin’s Russia accepts pragmatic views, and the Balkans is not an exception. Of course, the environment has changed during the last two decades, and may change further, but this pattern is very likely to be followed in the years to come.

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³⁶ Kuchins A., Zevelev I. (2012) Liberals, Balancers, and Nationalists, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter 2012).

³⁷ Interview given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Rossiya, NTV, August 31, 2008, <http://archive.kremlin.ru> (accessed on: March 22, 2013).

³⁸ Bonin (2001)

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