

THE RHETORIC OF THE KREMLIN OR THE PROPAGANDA DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract: *The content analysis of Putin's speeches¹, in the present work, aims to identify the propaganda techniques through which the Kremlin's rhetoric tries to justify the war in Ukraine, which broke out on February 24, 2022. Russia's military attack in Ukraine follows the trajectory of the March 18, 2014, annexation of Crimea, only the Kremlin's discourse denies the concepts of war and annexation and replaces them with the term "special military operation"², liberation from NATO's eastward military expansion or accession to Russia, including all forms of Western military threat to the Soviet East, as evidenced by the Kremlin's propaganda discourse. The Kremlin's discourse, in the context of the armed operations in Ukraine, has a symbolic capital through which it imposes its own perspective, because no symbolic power can exist without a symbolism of power (Bourdieu 112). It is about the discourse of power, constructed through symbolic resources, intended to be disseminated so that the Kremlin's conative force is even more strongly activated among Russian citizens. On the other hand, pragmatically, such a construction is also a message of the Kremlin's authority to Western countries.*

Keywords: *Kremlin discourse, Putin, Ukraine war, Russian propaganda, symbolic resources*

The Justification of War

The corpus of this paper includes three public speeches of Vladimir Putin on February 24, 2022, March 18, 2022 and May 9, 2022. The Kremlin leader aims to control public opinion through various instruments of propaganda in this selection from the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

Putin's February 24, 2022 speech includes the Manichean vision specific to black propaganda (Pamment et al. 2018, 71), through an *ad hominem* (Pamment et al. 2018, 68) or attacks against opponents, in an *exordium*, *narratio* and *argumentatio* in which elements are brought to justify the "military operation" in Ukraine:

„The fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians have created for Russia consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year. I am referring to the eastward expansion of

¹ 24 February, 18 March, 9 May 2022.

² <https://tacatata.prosport.ro/putin-a-declansat-razboiul-in-ucraina-incepe-operatiunea-militara-in-donbas-170866/> accessed on 4.07.2022.

NATO, which is moving its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border”³

The discursive elements through which Putin builds the justification of the war are primarily aimed at Russia's relationship with the West, and secondarily at the relationship with Ukraine. Thus, Putin composes an image of Russian diplomatic policy through the technique of transfer (Pamment *et al.* 2018, 69) or the association with positive, moral attributes ("for the last 30 years we have patiently tried to reach an agreement with the main NATO countries") and transfers a negative image for NATO, using verdicts, accusing the alliance of deception, pressure, and blackmail:

„we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic Alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns”⁴.

Through processes of intertextuality, labeling and the technique of transfer (Domenach 2004, 83-85), Putin seeks justifications for his actions, looking back at history and condemning NATO for terrorism, disregard for international law, military expansion to the east and the illegal use of power in Serbia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria:

„First a bloody military operation was waged against Belgrade, without the UN Security Council’s sanction but with combat aircraft and missiles used in the heart of Europe. ... Then came the turn of Iraq, Libya and Syria. The illegal use of military power against Lybia and the distortion of all the UN Security Council decisions on Libya ruined the state, created a huge seat of international terrorism, and pushed the country towards a humanitarian catastrophe in the vortex of a civil war, which has continued there for years. The tragedy, which was created for hundreds of thousands and even millions of people not only in Libya but in the whole region, has led to a large-scale exodus from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe”⁵.

We recall here Douglas Kellner's study of the media coverage of the Gulf War (1990), where the researcher analyzes American disinformation through the production of news to justify the American military invasion, arguing that the media followed "the lines drawn by the Bush administration and the

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qS6J-WbTD8>, accessed on 7.05.2022

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qS6J-WbTD8>, accessed on 7.05.2022.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qS6J-WbTD8>, accessed on 7.05.2022.

Pentagon" (Kellner 2001, 239). The mainstream media welcomed the deployment of troops to Iraq, mobilizing support for US policy, US media discourse being pro-war or pro-US policy, "a propaganda tool for the national security and military apparatus" (Kellner 2001, 240).

Discussing on the Gulf conflict, Noam Chomsky's study claims that the alleged "motive" for the Iraq war "was to rid the world of a tyrant who manufactured weapons of mass destruction and had ties to terrorists" (Chomsky 2007, 60). Chomsky adds that, in reality, no one believes in such scenarios anymore, "not even Bush's speechwriters." N. Chomsky also surmises after the 9/11 terrorist attack that Bush II's doctrine is "to rid the world of evil" (Chomsky 2007, 77), the enemy being depicted in the "posture of the incorrigible villain" (Chomsky 2007, 21), through offensive propaganda. "The global war on terror" (Chomsky 2007, 163) was the American justification for the invasion of Iraq (in 2002-2003), but Chomsky points out that "the invasion succeeded only in increasing the terrorist threat" (Chomsky 2007, 77). The reasons for the American military invasion were just false arguments to justify the war: "we invaded Iraq to establish a democracy here, a real bridgehead for the democratization of the entire Middle East" (Chomsky 2007, 60). We also recall the attack in Syria in April 2018, when the US, Great Britain and France invaded Syria militarily, at the risk of violating International Law and without UN approval. *The Telegraph* headlined Theresa May's statement authorizing the armed attack in Syria, President Emmanuel Macron's claims that he motivated the attack by halting the production of chemical weapons, and the US Defense Secretary's perspective. *The Telegraph* published Syria's response to the armed attack, which denounced the violation of international law, and the reaction of President Vladimir Putin, who condemned the actions of allied states, considering them breaches of international law (Bafană Tocia 2020, 103-104). At the same time, *The Telegraph* presented the position of Cyprus, which distanced itself from involvement in the armed attack and suggested that these attacks should be reduced in the case of Syria, not bringing a beneficial effect to the state, the position of China, which claimed that the attack in Syria violated international law, but also the statement of Iran's supreme leader, who qualified the Western attack against Syria as "murder".⁶ Thus, we are witnessing the supremacy of one system over another or "a kind of popular authoritarianism" (Appadurai quoted in Geiselberg 2017, 15) on behalf of the great states of the world, as Arjun Appadurai remarked in *The Wear and Tear of Democracy*, when he referred to Trump's America, Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey, and to numerous examples of the authoritarian governments like those of Orban in Hungary or Duda in Poland (Bafană Tocia, 2020, 105-104). We

⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/14/syria-airstrikes-donald-trump-set-make-announcement-military/> accessed on 10.05.2018.

observe from the contexts to which we refer, the tendency towards deglobalization, nationalism, domination, which are contrary to the ideal of a "participatory globalization" (Kodolko, 2015, 89-91). Appadurai cites the example of Putin-controlled Russia, when in 2014 he "signed a decree to introduce a new state cultural policy, built around the slogan 'Russia is not Europe'" (Appadurai quoted in Geiselberg 2017, 17-18).

Noam Chomsky writes about the smoldering crisis on the Russia-NATO border and points to Richard Sakwa's study which states that "the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 was, in fact, the first war to stop NATO expansion; the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 is the second moment. It is not very certain that humanity will survive a third" (Sakwa 2015, 55 quoted in Chomsky 2018, 270). Chomsky recalls the NATO summit in Bucharest, in April 2008, "when Georgia and Ukraine were promised eventual NATO membership" and states that "Russia's concerns are easy to understand" regarding the expansion of NATO, the removal of Ukraine from its influence sphere and its integration into the West (Chomsky 2018, 272). Moreover, reversing the roles, Chomsky echoes John J. Mearsheimer's opinion, published in 2014: "the United States does not tolerate distant great powers deploying military forces anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, much less on its borders" (Mearsheimer 2014 quoted in Chomsky 2018, 272-273). Recently, Chomsky declared that the Russian invasion of Ukraine "has no moral justification" and is "the supreme international crime like the American invasion of Iraq". Advocating for diplomacy or negotiation, Chomsky says that "the propaganda war is on, and the objective is to achieve a certain degree of ignorance...which can be catastrophic, given that the war in Ukraine, but also the inflation, the recession that is brewing, the refugee crisis, the food crisis will affect the world for at least a generation."⁷

Returning to the context of the war in Ukraine and Russian propaganda, through an operation of trans-semiotization of the discourse or intertextuality, Putin places a verdict on the invasion of Iraq by the United States and on American disinformation:

„But the example that stands apart from the above events is, of course, the invasion of Iraq without any legal grounds. They used the pretext of allegedly reliable information available in the United States about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. To prove that allegation, the US Secretary of State held up a vial with white powder, publicly, for the whole world to see, assuring the international community that it was a chemical warfare agent created in Iraq. It later

⁷ <https://www.cotidianul.ro/chomsky-ignoranta-si-isteria-au-atins-cote-fara-precedent/>, accessed on 4.07.2022.

turned out that all of that was a fake and a sham, and that Iraq did not have any chemical weapons. Incredible and shocking but the facts remain. We witnessed lies made at the biggest state level and voiced from the high UN rostrum. As a result we see a tremendous loss in human life, damage, destruction, and a colossal upsurge of terrorism”⁸

At the same time, intertextuality and glittering generalization or the technique of positive transfer are used in painting a picture where Russia appears as a savior, defending Crimea, and Sevastopol:

„...in 2000-2005 we used our military to push back against terrorists in the Caucasus and stood up for the integrity of our state. We preserved Russia. In 2014 we supported the people of Crimea and Sevastopol. In 2015 we used our armed forces to create a reliable shield that prevented terrorists from Syria from penetrating Russia. This was a matter of defending ourselves.”⁹

Narratio is constructed with reference to American expansion through the metaphor of "empire of lies" in order to denounce the American influence or hegemony over other states which Putin calls “satellites”:

„The United States is still a great country and a system-forming power. All its satellites not only humbly and obediently say yes to and parrot it at the slightest pretext but also imitate its behaviour and enthusiastically accept the rules it is offering them. Therefore one can say with good reason and confidence that the whole so-called Western bloc formed by the United States in its own image and likeness is, in its entirety, the very same “empire of lies”...Properly speaking, the attempts to use us in their own interests never ceased until quite recently: they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries... The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile “anti-Russia” is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons”.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qS6J-WbTD8>, accessed on 7.05.2022.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qS6J-WbTD8>, accessed on 7.05.2022.

Next, Putin lays out the purpose of the war in Ukraine, which he calls an "operation", redundantly emphasizing the desire to protect people and demilitarize Ukraine:

„The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.”¹⁰

The Ceremony as a Symbolic Bridge

One of the "hot" points of staging Kremlin's political discourse was the event at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow, a ceremonial concert – symbolic bridge – called the "Crimean Spring", on the eighth anniversary of Crimea's "accession" to Russia¹¹, through which Putin attempted to legitimize his figure of authority (Wunenburger 2004, 341) by way of discourse, self-image, and by resorting to acts of theatricalization. The popular rhetoric of power is characteristic of the discourse of authority, aspires to positive connotations and stereotypes, and conveys symbolic resources with perlocutionary goals dominated by pathos. Populist authoritarianism includes domination and, in this case, reconstructs the order of its own "truth" or the "stake of truth" in the ceremonial ritual at the stadium, which, although conjunctural, being the celebration of eight years since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, is integrated into the spectacular. The symbolic resources that were created (Gerstlé, 2002, 76), the metaphorical name of the "Crimean Spring" concert, the summoning of young people to the stadium, the flags and cockades with the letter "Z" written on them (symbol of the Russian invasion of Ukraine also used on Russian tanks), the cheers of the public in the "arena", the music in the stadium, the artists or bands that sang patriotic songs, the organization of an outdoor show, build the symbolic capital through which the Kremlin aims to strengthen its monopoly of power in the Russian public space. The signs of theatricalization are nothing more than the "obtuse" in the Barthesian sense indicating something that "has to do with disguise" (Barthes 2015, 65), and the visual metaphors used in the stadium have the role of strengthening the "semantic identity" (Eco 2008, 396) of the Kremlin. The organization of institutional ceremonies utilizes the "logic of the gift", the "parade", the "protocol imperative", incorporated in the concept of "potlach" (Lardellier 2003, 45), which are all symbolic. The

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qS6J-WbTD8>, accessed on 7.05.2022.

¹¹ The Kremlin's rhetoric denies the annexation of Crimea, replacing the operation with the term "accession".

lavishness of political ceremonial brings, in addition to the function of legitimation, two other strategies included in political ritual: *admiration and awe* or *fascination and terror* (Lardellier 2003, 46).

Thus, through legitimization, power and authority are "mobilized and constructed as representing the good"¹², and the discourse employs the Manichean vision (*we are the good ones, the saviors, and they are the bad ones*) or the technique of transfer, specific to propaganda:

„...the Russian Constitution. Each word has deep meaning and enormous significance. ... We needed to drag Crimea out of that humiliating position and state that Crimea and Sevastopol had been pushed into when they were part of another state that had only provided leftover financing to these territories. ... The main goal and motive of the military operation that we launched in Donbass and Ukraine is to relieve these people of suffering, of this genocide. ... At this point, I recall the words from the Holy Scripture: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.””¹³.

In the construction of the false rhetoric of "ethos", the language borrows phrases referring to Christianity, self-sacrifice or the "Holy Scripture", which are intertextuality procedures through which the speaker appears as the "archetype of the savior" for certain territories in Ukraine:

“...And we are seeing how heroically our military are fighting during this operation. ... These words come from the Holy Scripture of Christianity, from what is cherished by those who profess this religion. But the bottom line is that this is a universal value for all nations and those of all religions in Russia, and primarily for our people. The best evidence of this is how our fellows are fighting and acting in this operation: shoulder to shoulder, helping and supporting each other. If they have to, they will cover each other with their bodies to protect their comrade from a bullet in the battlefield, as they would to save their brother. It has been a long time since we had such unity.

It so happened that, by sheer coincidence, the start of the operation was same day as the birthday of one of our outstanding military leaders who was canonised – Fedor Ushakov. He did not lose a single battle throughout his brilliant career. He once said that these thunderstorms

¹² <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68016>

¹³ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68016>

would glorify Russia. This is how it was in his time; this is how it is today and will always be!”¹⁴.

Political authority is based "on an intensely symbolic imaginary of power" (Wunenburger, 2004, 346), and the use of the image of saints is an apparent simulation of the original referent, king, saint, deity, "which makes any contracting will already by its nature a bound, subject will" (Wunenburger, 2004, 343). Putin does not include the word "war" in his speech, but replaces it with the phrase "operation", avoiding, at the discourse level, the military register. *Ethos* is included in the *pathos* of communication through the use of positive connotations, complimentary to Russians, and of "glittering generalizations" specific to propaganda: "universal value", "shoulder to shoulder", "save their brother", "our outstanding military leaders who was canonised".

Another method of intertextuality, of Manichean vision or labeling is observed by referring to Nazi policies, as Putin uses a tactical argument to justify the operation: the denazification of the provinces of Ukraine:

„...the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol made the right choice when they put up a firm barrier against neo-Nazis and ultra-nationalists. ... People who lived and live in Donbass did not agree with this coup d'état, either. Several punitive military operations were instantly staged against them; they were besieged and subjected to systemic shelling with artillery and bombing by aircraft – and this is actually what is called “genocide.” The main goal and motive of the military operation that we launched in Donbass and Ukraine is to relieve these people of suffering...”¹⁵

In articulating the false arguments, Putin exposes the exact opposite of the facts in Ukraine, using implicit judgmental illocution and the technique of *whataboutism* (Pamment et al. 2018, 69)¹⁶: „they were besieged and subjected to systemic shelling...and this is actually what is called “genocide””. Thus, the order of things is turned upside down, power no longer depends on truth, but we have "a dependence of truth on power", a complex of control at all levels (Foucault).

The live broadcast of the ceremony was interrupted, and a footage of a musical moment was broadcast by the TV channel Russia 24 at the time of the

¹⁴ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68016>

¹⁵ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68016>

¹⁶ “Whataboutism is a double rhetorical move. It consists, firstly, of deflecting an argument by drawing attention to a similar phenomenon which ostensibly does not get as much attention” (Pamment et al. 2018, 69).

incident, which misinformed viewers, who thought they are watching a live event. Instead, images from 2021, from a similar event at the stadium, celebrating the annexation of Crimea, were broadcast. Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for the Russian presidency, said the outage was caused by a server failure.¹⁷

In the analysed speeches, Putin's propaganda discourse pursues all the specific forms of persuasion: the standardization of opinions (Larson 2003, 393) and public behaviours through a Manichean vision (Thom 2005, 48) (the enemies are bad, and the good ones are the saviours), glittering generalizations (McClung Lee and Briant Lee quoted in Severin and Tankard Jr 2003, 112-123) by self-aggrandizement, the rule of emphasizing and disfiguring by "exaggerating the facts" (McClung Lee and Briant Lee quoted in Severin and Tankard Jr 2003, 112-123), the rule of orchestration by repeating messages and adapting them to different audiences (Domenach, 2004, 76-82), but also by the rule of simplification which "concentrates the energy of the targets towards the single enemy" (Domenach, 2004, 69-73).

Another parade specific to Russian propaganda was the one on 9 May, Victory Day, in the Red Square, when the 77th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany was celebrated.¹⁸

The Romanian historian and diplomat Theodor Paleologu states that "8 May means victory against Nazism" and that "Russia celebrates Victory Day against the Nazis on 9 May, namely the capitulation of Germany in 1945. In contrast, Westerners celebrate the defeat of Hitler on 8 May. The European Union celebrates something else entirely: Robert Schuman's speech on 9 May 9, 1950, the founding message of the European Community". The same historian explains the celebration on 8 May and 9 May of an event marking the same historical moment:

„Simply a time zone difference. In the Soviet Union it was already May 9, and in order to somehow distinguish themselves from the Western allies, the Soviets emphasized the day of May 9, but obviously there is this explanation related to the time zone difference”¹⁹.

"It must be said that the United States practically helped Western Europe rise from the ashes, through the Marshall Plan and then the North Atlantic Alliance, which ensured the security of Europe. It can legitimately be said that it is a day of Europe, but it has a cathartic dimension, a Europe cleansed of

¹⁷ <https://www.antena3.ro/externe/putin-discurs-stadion-luzhniki-632996.html>

¹⁸ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/semnificatie-9-mai-interviu-theodor-paleologu/31841375.html>, accessed on 4.07.2022.

¹⁹ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/semnificatie-9-mai-interviu-theodor-paleologu/31841375.html>, accesat în 4.07.2022.

Nazism, let's say, and a rebirth from its own ashes. Europe was reborn like the Phoenix Bird, after May 8, 1945, but, I repeat, it is only about Western Europe"²⁰, argued Theodor Paleologu.

The celebration was overshadowed by the bloody attacks in Ukraine, where on May 8, 2022, a Russian airstrike killed 60 Ukrainians sheltering in a school. The same laws of propaganda build a judgmental speech against the West:

“NATO countries did not want to heed us, which means they had totally different plans... Another punitive operation in Donbass, an invasion of our historic lands, including Crimea, was openly in the making. ...”²¹

It reinforces the justification for "military operations" in Ukraine by Putin's claim that „You are fighting for our Motherland, its future, so that nobody forgets the lessons of World War II...”²², “...There was every indication that a clash with neo-Nazis and Banderites backed by the United States and their minions was unavoidable... Russia launched a pre-emptive strike at the aggression.”²³.

One of the most representative sequences for the exploitation of hyper-emotion is the one in which Russian children are made to parade dressed in military uniforms, in model tanks and airplanes with the letter Z,²⁴ being used as tools in the propaganda narrative. Thus, the symbolic political ritual continued with the Moscow Parade that culminated with a firework show in the evening. Referring to symbolic rallies, Jean Marie Domenach writes that "the most widespread means of contagion is the mass demonstration, rally or parade" (Domenach 2004, 91-98) with flags, emblems, inscriptions, "uniforms that create a heroic atmosphere", music, marching bands, hymns that "contribute to the immersion of the individual in the mass and the creation of a unique consciousness" (Domenach 2004, 91-98). About the projectors or torches used in political propaganda, the quoted author writes that they increase the fascination of the public and refers to the psychoanalysis of fire studied by Bachelard which "showed that fire pushes the human being into various and deep reveries". Domenach also mentions Hitler's propaganda that used fire in night demonstrations (Domenach 2004, 91-98).

²⁰ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/semnificatie-9-mai-interviu-theodor-paleologu/31841375.html>, accesat în 4.07.2022.

²¹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68366>

²² <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68366>

²³ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68366>

²⁴ <https://www.antena3.ro/externe/putin-copii-gradinita-litera-z-parada-ziua-victoriei-638819.html>, accessed on 9.05.2022.

The *pathos* of the speech is evident when the Kremlin leader emphasized unionism through phrases such as "the security of our motherland, Russia", "the victory of the Soviet people", and by highlighting defensive and not offensive actions on Soviet territory, including Ukraine and Crimea in Putin's speech:

“Today, as in the past, you are fighting for our people in Donbass, for the security of our Motherland, for Russia.

May 9, 1945 has been enshrined in world history forever as a triumph of the united Soviet people, its cohesion and spiritual power, an unparalleled feat on the front lines and on the home front. (...)

We take pride in the unconquered courageous generation of the victors, we are proud of being their successors, and it is our duty to preserve the memory of those who defeated Nazism and entrusted us with being vigilant and doing everything to thwart the horror of another global war. Therefore, despite all controversies in international relations, Russia has always advocated the establishment of an equal and indivisible security system which is critically needed for the entire international community. Last December we proposed signing a treaty on security guarantees. Russia urged the West to hold an honest dialogue in search for meaningful and compromising solutions, and to take account of each other's interests. All in vain. NATO countries did not want to heed us, which means they had totally different plans. And we saw it.

Another punitive operation in Donbass, an invasion of our historic lands, including Crimea, was openly in the making. Kiev declared that it could attain nuclear weapons. The NATO bloc launched an active military build-up on the territories adjacent to us.”²⁵

Conclusions

The Kremlin's speech presents a redundancy of the specific techniques of malignant rhetoric included in propaganda: whataboutism, ad hominem, labeling or discrediting other nations, symbolic resources used in festivities, false analogies, false ethos, but also the technique of transfer as a rhetorical trick through evoking some aspects of past NATO operations.

In general, the justification of the war is done by accusing the accuser and by using "counter-arguments" or "false arguments", which do not bring elements to support the decisions regarding the invasion of Ukraine.

In fact, war has no moral justification, and, in an interconnected world, its effects are felt at global level: „ Our world has become so interdependent

²⁵ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/68366>

that violent conflict between two countries inevitably impacts the rest of the world”²⁶.

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²⁶ <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2022/hope-for-dialogue-to-restore-peace-in-ukraine>