

Ethnic Identity and Psychological Well-Being of Russians in Post-Soviet Space: The Role of Diaspora

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The article analyzes the role of different forms of diaspora activity as a mediator of the relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being of Russians in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia (N = 609). The results of structural equation modeling showed that ethnic identity salience is significantly positively associated with the involvement in all types of Russian diaspora activities both in Kyrgyzstan and in Estonia. Russians' participation in all types of diaspora activity is significantly higher in Kyrgyzstan than in Estonia. Participation in different types of diaspora activity mediates the relationship of ethnic identity and psychological well-being: in Kyrgyzstan – participation in public actions and activity aimed at preservation of collective historical memory; in Estonia – activity aimed at maintenance of Russian language and culture. The results can serve as the basis for practical recommendations for supporting the Russian diaspora in the post-Soviet space.

Keywords: ethnic identity, diaspora activity, psychological well-being, Russians, Kyrgyzstan, Estonia.

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Этническая идентичность и благополучие русских на постсоветском пространстве: роль диаспоры

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В статье анализируется роль диаспорной активности как медиатора взаимосвязи этнической идентичности и психологического благополучия у русских Кыргызстана и Эстонии (N=609). Результаты структурного моделирования показали, что выраженность этнической идентичности позитивно связана с вовлеченностью в деятельность русской диаспоры в обеих странах, при этом диаспорная активность русских значимо выше в Кыргызстане, чем в Эстонии. Участие в разных видах диаспорной активности медирует взаимосвязь этнической идентичности и психологического благополучия русских: сохранение коллективной исторической памяти и участие в публичных акциях в Кыргызстане и активность по сохранению русского языка и культуры в Эстонии. Результаты исследования могут послужить основой практических рекомендаций по поддержке русской диаспоры на постсоветском пространстве.

Ключевые слова: этническая идентичность, диаспорная активность, психологическое благополучие, русские, Кыргызстан, Эстония.

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Introduction

It is difficult to overestimate the role of diasporas in the modern world. Due to globalization and migration processes, the number of diasporas is constantly increasing. The analysis showed that the term “diaspora” does not have a universal content [5;8], however, many authors identify a number of common characteristics of the diaspora: unity of ethnic origin, the presence of persistent ethnic identity, being in alien cultural environment outside the area of settlement of their people, the presence of social institutions to meet the needs of the diaspora [8].

Based on these characteristics, we can consider ethnic Russians living in the countries of the former USSR (about 15.5 million people [10]) as a diaspora.

In the early 90s, attempts of self-organization of Russian diasporas in the post-Soviet space were unsuccessful. The situation began to change after Russia took care of the fate of its compatriots and officially made the issue a priority in its foreign policy [1].

The objectives of this study are:

- to identify the most popular types of diaspora activity of ethnic Russians in the countries of the former USSR (now independent Kyrgyzstan and Estonia),
- to identify the role of the diaspora activity of Russians in the relationship of their ethnic identity and psychological well-being. In other words, does participation in various diaspora actions strengthen the positive self-perception of Russians in the post-Soviet space, or, conversely, reduces it?

Sociocultural context: comparative analysis

This study was conducted in two countries of the former Soviet Union – Kyrgyzstan and Estonia. Russians settled in these countries more than 200 years ago. After the collapse of the USSR, there was a mass migration of Russians from these republics. Today, Russians in Kyrgyzstan number 341.4 thousand people, or 5.1% [7], in Estonia – 322.7 thousand, or 24.3% [20].

After the collapse of the USSR, Russians received Kyrgyz citizenship automatically. According to 2011 data, about 54% of Estonian Russians had Estonian citizenship, about 24% had Russian citizenship, and about 21% had non-citizen status [21].

There are two official languages in Kyrgyzstan – Kyrgyz and Russian [4]. In Estonia, the only state and official language is Estonian [23].

Russian is the only language of instruction in 216 schools in Kyrgyzstan, and 551 schools have a mixed language of instruction (Kyrgyz-Russian) [6]. 70% of students study in Russian at universities in Kyrgyzstan, and 30% of children study in schools. In Estonia, only 78 schools teach in Russian [18]. Since 2007, 60% of all subjects in high school are taught in Estonian [19]. The majority of Russian-speaking residents of the country prefer to send their children to educational institutions with the Estonian language of instruction. Russians in Estonia have a pronounced orientation towards the preservation of the language and Russian cultural traditions [9]. This circumstance allows researchers to talk about the nonlinearity of integration processes – increasing the level of proficiency in the state language, acceptance of Estonian citizenship and improvement of the socio-economic status of Estonian Russians does not mean their social and identification integration into Estonian society [15].

According to experts, the institutions of the Russian Diaspora are an effective mechanism of integration [2; 13]. In Soviet times, the Russian diaspora in Kyrgyzstan, as in other republics of the former USSR, was not consolidated. However, after the collapse of the USSR, problems appeared, the solution of which required common participation (preservation of the Russian language, culture). This led to the emergence of the first public organizations in Kyrgyzstan [2], most of which were engaged in humanitarian programs and folklore events.

Since the mid-noughties, many organizations have begun to build their work in accordance with the expectations of the diaspora. Features of the socio-political situation in Kyrgyzstan (frequent changes of political elites) influenced the desire of Russians to participate in the political life of the country. Human rights and youth organizations are being formed, whose activities are aimed at preserving historical memory, for example, participation in public actions: “Immortal Regiment”, etc. Currently, more than 70 public associations of Russian compatriots are officially registered in Kyrgyzstan [13].

Within the framework of the Union of Associations of Russian Compatriots, 42 associations of social, patriotic, cultural, educational and sports orientation have been created in Estonia [12]. However, the involvement of representatives of the Russian ethnic minority in the life of the Diaspora remains quite low. Russians’ blurred ethnic identity [24], lack of bright leaders [22], heterogeneity of the Russian community, length of residence in the country and degree of integration into Estonian

society are among the factors hindering the unification of Russians [9; 24].

Russian Diaspora is actively working towards the preservation of the Russian language and culture. A large number of events, festivals and holidays are held. Also, for Russians in Estonia, it is important to preserve the collective memory of the events of the Second World War. Ethnic Russians' need to preserve their historical heritage is actualized by the peculiarities of the socio-cultural context associated with the fact that the Estonian interpretation of the past denies the positive image of the Russian soldier as a hero-liberator [25].

The analysis made it possible to identify a number of common positions and features of each of the countries. Ethnic Russians' blurred ethnic identity in both countries and weak consolidation of the Russian community have been noted since the collapse of the USSR. The diasporas of both countries are characterized by the desire to preserve collective historical memory. Ethnic Russians have different needs in the two countries, in which the diaspora can play an important role: in Kyrgyzstan, it is the participation of Russians in the socio-political life of the country, in Estonia – the preservation of the Russian language and culture.

Theoretical foundations of the study

In our study, we relied on the theory of social identity, which considers the power of identification as an important factor of activity associated with group membership [29]. People who identify themselves more strongly with their group are more prone to prosocial behavior towards other members of the group [27].

Based on these data, and taking into account the fact that the “blurred” ethnic identity did not contribute to the unification of Russians into communities [24], we put forward our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. The expression of ethnic identity of representatives of the Russian ethnic minority will be positively associated with their diaspora activity in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia.

A number of studies have found that ethnic identity is positively associated with self-esteem [16; 30] and life satisfaction [28] among ethnic minorities. However, there are studies showing that a pronounced ethnic identity does not always contribute to psychological well-being, an

important role in this relationship is played by the socio-cultural context [17]. Studies conducted in Estonia revealed a negative relationship between ethnic identity and satisfaction with the life of ethnic Russians [25]. Based on these data, we focused on the component of psychological well-being most associated with ethnic identity – self-esteem – and put forward our second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. The expression of ethnic identity of representatives of the Russian ethnic minority is positively correlated with their self-esteem in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia.

Studies show that involvement in the activities of the diaspora contributes to the preservation of a positive ethnic identity, which can mitigate the negative consequences of perceived discrimination, increasing psychological well-being [26].

Taking into account the analysis of the socio-cultural context, we assumed that different types of diaspora activity will be more often manifested in these two republics: in Estonia, it will be more common for ethnic Russians to protect their language and culture, in Kyrgyzstan, participation in political and public actions will be more significant. In both countries, it will be important for ethnic Russians to participate in movements to preserve collective historical memory, since the interpretation of the events of the twentieth century often differs among representatives of the majority and minority in these countries.

Based on this, we formulated our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Different types of diaspora activity in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia will be positively interrelated with the psychological well-being of representatives of the Russian ethnic minority.

Taking into account the complex relationship between ethnic identity and the psychological well-being of Russians, as well as the peculiarities of the socio-cultural context of the countries studied, we formulated our research question:

Can different forms of diaspora activity influence this relationship?

Method

Sample of the study

300 ethnic Russian respondents from Kyrgyzstan and 309 ethnic Russian respondents from Estonia took part in the socio-psychological survey (Table 1).

Table 1

Gender and age characteristics of the sample

Respondents	N	Gender		Age			
		Male	Female	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Russians of Kyrgyzstan	300	35,2%	64,8%	17	65	35,56	17,40
Russians of Estonia	309	47,9%	52,1%	18	75	37,46	16,56

Research procedure

The survey used a convenient sample, we used the “snowball” method. Researchers from the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University helped in distributing the questionnaire in Kyrgyzstan, and researchers from Tallinn University helped in Estonia. Participation in the study was voluntary, anonymity was guaranteed.

Tools

Ethnic identity [3]. The scale included 4 statements, for example, “I am proud to be Russian.”

Diasporic activity. The scale includes 4 subscales measuring different activities of the Diaspora:

“the preservation of the Russian language and culture” (e.g., “I read the local Russian-language press”);

“participation in the life of the Orthodox communities” (e.g., “I attended services in the Russian Orthodox Church”);

“the preservation of the collective memory” (e.g., “I mark memorable dates of Russian history together with other members of the community”);

“participation in public actions” (for example, “Together with other members of the community, I participate in public actions”).

Self-esteem. We used a scale of 4 statements (for example, “In general, I am satisfied with myself” [3].

Life satisfaction. A scale was used that included 4 statements (for example, “In general, I am satisfied with my life”) [3].

Respondents gave their answers on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 “Completely disagree” to 5 – “Completely agree”.

Mathematical and statistical analysis was carried out using the SPSS 27.0 statistical package using the additional PROCESS module and the AMOS program.

Results

Table 2 shows the average values of all the variables studied. A comparative analysis using MANOVA, where the country was an independent variable, and the significance of ethnic identity, the level of diasporic activity and psychological well-being were dependent variables, showed a significant effect of Wilks’s $\Lambda=0.777$, $F(7, 599)=24.517$, $p=0.000$, $\eta^2= 0,223$.

The results showed that almost all variables were significantly higher among Russians in Kyrgyzstan than in Estonia, except for the level of life satisfaction.

To test hypotheses, we used structural equation modeling. Our multigroup analysis of the relationship between ethnic identity, diaspora activity and psychological well-being of Russians in the two countries showed the absence of structural invariance (the indicators obtained by us $\Delta CFI= 0.04$; $\Delta RMSEA= 0.08$ were higher than the recommended ones – $\Delta CFI < 0.01$; $\Delta RMSEA < 0.01$). Based on this, we analyzed the data of the relationship in each of the countries separately. The model (Fig. 1) demonstrated good fitness indicators: Kyrgyzstan- $\chi^2/df = 0,05$, $CFI=1,00$, $SRMR=0,002$, $RMSEA=0,01$ $PCLOSE=0,88$; Estonia – $\chi^2/df = 0,24$; $CFI = 1,00$, $SRMR = 0,005$, $RMSEA = 0,00$, $PCLOSE = 0,74$.

According to the results, the expression of ethnic identity is significantly positively associated with involvement in all types of activities of the Russian diaspora in both countries, which confirms our first hypothesis.

Further, we analyzed the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem of Russians in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia, which turned out to be positive, but not statistically significant. Our second hypothesis was not confirmed.

Table 2

Comparison of the significance of ethnic identity, types of diaspora activity and psychological well-being of representatives of the Russian ethnic minority in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia

№	Variables	Kyrgyzstan			Estonia			F (3,601)	Partial η^2
		M	SD	α	M	SD	α		
1	Ethnic identity	4,30	0,77	0,70	4,01	1,01	0,91	17,31	0,03***
Types of diaspora activity									
2	Preservation of the Russian language and culture	3,93	0,85	0,83	3,49	1,01	0,85	33,41	0,05***
3	Participation in the life of the Orthodox Community	2,73	1,19	0,85	2,23	1,16	0,89	30,78	0,05***
4	Preservation of collective memory	3,87	0,96	0,79	2,90	1,21	0,87	124,91	0,17***
5	Participation in public actions	3,60	1,04	0,75	2,65	1,21	0,83	108,07	0,15***
Psychological well-being									
6	Self-esteem	4,31	0,57	0,68	4,08	0,58	0,81	25,35	0,04***
7	Life satisfaction	3,35	0,80	0,74	3,34	0,81	0,80	0,027	0,000

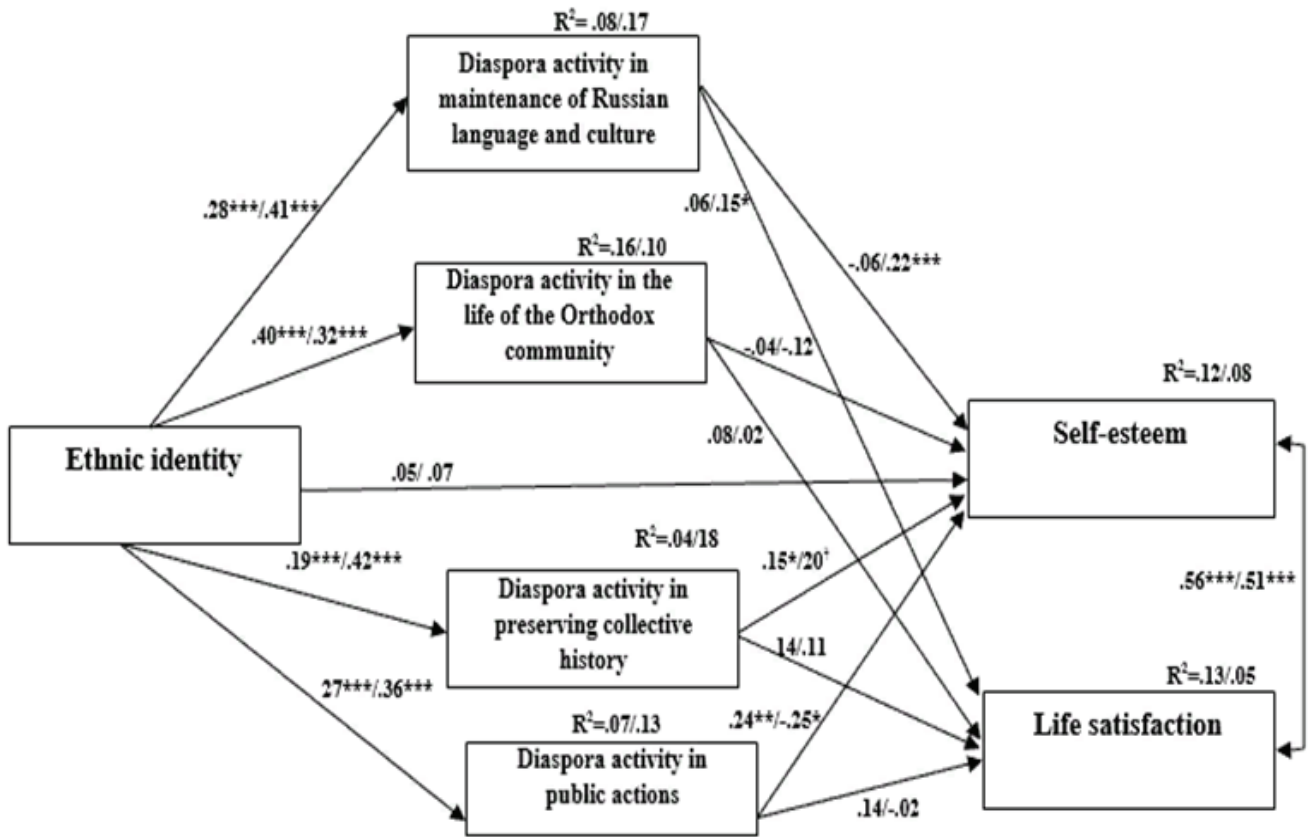


Fig. 1. A path model of the relationship between ethnic identity, diaspora activity and psychological well-being of representatives of the Russian ethnic minority in Kyrgyzstan /Estonia: † – $p = 0,06$; * – $p < 0,05$; ** – $p < 0,01$; *** – $p < 0,001$.

To test the third hypothesis, we analyzed the relationship between participation in different types of diaspora activity and psychological well-being among Russians in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia. Involvement in the preservation of collective historical memory, as well as participation in public actions were significantly positively associated with self-esteem among Kyrgyz Russians. At the same time, the interrelationships of participation in the life of the Orthodox Community and activity to preserve the native language and culture with the psychological well-being of Kyrgyz Russians were insignificant.

In Estonia, on the contrary, there was a significant positive relationship between diaspora activity to preserve the Russian language and culture with indicators of psychological well-being (self-esteem and life satisfaction), and a significant negative relationship between participation in public actions and self-esteem. In addition, at the level of statistical trend ($p = .061$), a positive relationship between participation in community activities for the preservation of collective memory and self-esteem was revealed. The relationship between involvement in the life of the Orthodox Community and psychological well-being in Estonia, as in Kyrgyzstan, was insignificant. These results partially confirmed our third hypothesis.

To answer our research question, a mediation analysis was conducted. The results showed that among Kyrgyz Russians there is a significant positive indirect effect of ethnic identity on self-esteem through diaspora activity aimed at preserving collective memory ($\beta = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI: [0.0001, 0.06]), as well as involvement in public actions of the diaspora ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI: [0.002, 0.08]).

Significant positive indirect effects of ethnic identity on self-esteem ($\beta = 0.09$, 95% CI: 0.03, 0.16) and life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.06$, 95% CI: [0.009, 0.12]) through diaspora activity aimed at preserving the Russian language and culture were found in Estonia. It is noteworthy that the direct effects of the expression of ethnic identity on self-esteem and life satisfaction, not mediated by diaspora activity, were insignificant in both countries.

Discussion

The results of our study confirmed the first hypothesis about the positive relationship of ethnic identity of ethnic Russians in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan with their involvement in the activities of the diaspora. These results are consistent with the results of previous studies indi-

cating a positive relationship between ethnic identity and active participation in community life [14].

Our second hypothesis about the direct relationship of ethnic identity with self-esteem has not been confirmed. The results obtained differ from the data of studies on samples of Chinese migrants in Canada [16] and Latin Americans in the USA [39]. Our results may be related to the fact that both ethnic Russians in Estonia and ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan have blurred ethnic identity [11; 24]. This may also be due to the peculiarities of the context. Ethnic Russians in Estonia [25] noted that the socio-political context contributing to the assimilation of Russians causes a negative relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being.

The third hypothesis about the positive relationship between the involvement in different types of diaspora activity and the psychological well-being of Russians in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia has been partially confirmed. In Kyrgyzstan, a positive correlation was revealed between the diaspora's activity to preserve collective historical memory and participation in public actions with the self-esteem of Russians.

Diaspora activity related to the preservation of the Russian language and culture in Kyrgyzstan had no significant connection with psychological well-being. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Russian language has a high status in the country, being the official language, according to the Constitution, is actively used in education [4] and in everyday life. There is also no significant relationship between diaspora activity in the life of the Orthodox Community and the psychological well-being of Russians in Kyrgyzstan.

In Estonia, a positive correlation was revealed between diaspora activity aimed at preserving the Russian language and culture, with self-esteem and life satisfaction. These results are consistent with previous studies, which indicate a pronounced orientation of Estonian Russians to preserve their native language and culture [15]. Many representatives of the Russian diaspora perceive the ethnic policy of the Estonian authorities as assimilative, which contributes to the formation of a so-called reactive identity that strengthens the ethnic component [25]. Hence, the preservation of the native language and culture is extremely important for the psychological well-being of Estonian Russians.

At the level of the trend in Estonia, a relationship was found between self-esteem and diaspora activity aimed at preserving collective historical memory. The results of previous studies show that the historical memory of the Second World War plays an important role in the national consciousness of Russians [25]. Victory Day is celebrated by 70% of representatives of the non-titular population of Estonia, another 30% consider it an important holiday, although they do not celebrate it personally

[31]. Thus, involvement in diaspora activity aimed at preserving the memory of the feat of Soviet soldiers contributes to the self-esteem of Russians.

The relationship between the psychological well-being of Russians and participation in the life of the Orthodox community in Estonia was also insignificant. In addition, a negative relationship between involvement in public actions and self-esteem was revealed in Estonia. It can be assumed that active participation in the social activities of the diaspora implies involvement in the Russian information field, with its characteristic narratives of discrimination against ethnic Russians in Estonia, which is why active participants in public organizations experience a sense of deprivation, "second-rate" and limited opportunities, which has a negative impact on their psychological well-being [22].

The results obtained indicate that there is no direct relationship between the expression of ethnic identity and the psychological well-being of Russian residents of Estonia. At the same time, they point to the presence of an indirect positive effect of ethnic identity on life satisfaction and self-esteem of ethnic Russians through their participation in diaspora activities aimed at preserving their native language and culture. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that a pronounced ethnic identity in itself is sometimes not enough to compensate for the impact of perceived discrimination on indicators of psychological well-being. Ethnic Russians, for example, degree of the expression of ethnic identity associated with life satisfaction, which can be explained by the peculiarities of the socio-political context that promotes assimilation: representatives of the Russian diaspora with a pronounced ethnic identity are more likely to perceive the reality surrounding them as unfair, discriminating, which negatively affects their life satisfaction [25]. Perhaps, participation in the diaspora's activities aimed at preserving the Russian language and culture helps to mitigate the negative impact of perceived discrimination, increasing self-confidence and directing resistance to assimilation pressure from the Estonian state in a more constructive direction.

Conclusion

Conducted cross-country study of the relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being in the post-Soviet space, as well as the role of diasporic activity in this relationship, allowed us to come to the following conclusions:

- The expression of ethnic identity is significantly positively associated with involvement in all types of activities of the Russian diaspora in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia.

• There is no significant direct relationship between the expression of ethnic identity and self-esteem among Russians in both Kyrgyzstan and Estonia.

• Participation of ethnic Russians in all types of diaspora activity is significantly higher in Kyrgyzstan than in Estonia.

Participation in different types of diaspora activity positively mediates the relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being: in Kyrgyzstan – preservation of collective historical memory and participation in public actions; in Estonia – activity for the preservation of the Russian language and culture, and the preservation of collective historical memory (at the level of a trend).

Russian Diaspora activity helps Russians in their positive self-perception, and efforts to preserve language and culture, preserve collective historical memory strengthen the relationship of ethnic self-identification

with psychological well-being – that is, the feeling of being Russian is associated not only with pain and humiliation, but with self-respect and pride in the achievements of their people.

This is one of the few socio-psychological studies that reveal the role of diaspora activity in the processes of ethnic identification and psychological well-being of Russians living in post-Soviet countries. It shows that for a normal, decent life of ethnic minorities, the preservation of their native language, culture, collective ideas about historical events, members of ethnic Russian minority need the institutions of the diaspora, its actions, as well as support from the “big” homeland, unobtrusive, delicate, taking into account the interests of Russians abroad, at the same time, real and effective. Scientific research on this problem can serve as a reliable basis for solutions in this area.

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