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ARMENIA IS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST (EU): IN THE CONTEXT OF THE REFORMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Historically, it turned so that Armenia is located at the junction of two civilizations – Western and Eastern. This has left a definite imprint on the mentality of Armenians. There is certain ambivalence in the Armenian society: in everyday life, in the culture, the perception of the external world, politics, education.

The article makes an attempt to reflect on how Armenians and Armenia, during the whole period of their existence, have always been under the influence (including the area of education) of global forces, the influence of the East and West. Usually this happens against their will. Therefore, addressing mainly Armenia's foreign policy in the field of higher education, the article highlights also political context, thus substantiating that Armenia's position has always been significant for security of the country and relations with neighbors, in its turn resulting in strategic choices and decisions not only in political arena but also in many crucial aspects, including educational.

In the situation of many researches in the field, the study is intended to analyze current situation of Armenia's relations with East and West, its position in the context of educational reforms, addressing Integration into European educational area, Bologna process, representing positive changes, tangible effects, main obstacles and various interpretations based on the results of the finding.

Key words: mediator, foreign policy, educational reforms, Bologna process, Europeanization. Integration into European educational area.

Історично склалося так, що Вірменія знаходиться на стику двох цивілізацій – Західної та Східної. Це наклало певний відбиток на менталітет вірмен. У вірменському суспільстві існує певна амбівалентність: в повсякденному житті, в культурі, в сприйнятті зовнішнього світу, в політиці, в освіті.



У статті зроблена спроба осмислити те, як вірмени і Вірменія протягом усього періоду свого існування завжди перебували під впливом (в тому числі і в сфері освіти) Сходу і Заходу. Зазвичай це відбувається проти їх волі. Тому, звертаючись головним чином до зовнішньої політики Вірменії в галузі вищої освіти, стаття акцентує увагу і на політичному контексті, обґрунтовуючи тим самим факт, що позиція Вірменії завжди була значущою для безпеки країни і відносин з сусідами, що, в свою чергу, призводило до стратегічних рішень не тільки на політичній арені, але й в багатьох най-важливіших аспектах, включаючи освітній.

Метою дослідження є аналіз поточної ситуації відносин Вірменії зі Сходом і Заходом, її позиції в контексті освітніх реформ, що стосуються інтеграції в європейський освітній простір, Болонського процесу.

Ключові слова: медіатор, зовнішня політика, освітні реформи, Болонський процес, європанізація, інтеграція в європейський освітній простір.

Introduction. The Republic of Armenia is one of the 48 countries that joined the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process by signing the Bergen Communiqué in 2005. Armenia has since implemented most of the initiatives agreed on by the ministers of education of the member states. It hosted the Secretariat of the Bologna Follow-up Group from 2012 to 2015, followed by the Ministerial Conference and the Fourth Bologna Policy Forum in 2015. Today Armenia is trying to implement a new vision for its higher education system while pursuing the goals of the EHEA agreed on in the 2015 Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué (Gharibyan, 2017).

It is essential to mention valuable European experience that is worth integrating into the field of higher education. There are many advantages of such integration: Introduction and development of Quality assurance systems; Institutional and program accreditation consistent with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance; Introduction of The European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS); modernization and improvement of funding of tertiary education through the introduction of more efficient principles and mechanisms for financial management. After incorporating most of the Bologna initiatives, it became evident that the higher education law in Armenia needed to be rewritten in order to support comprehensive implementation, particularly to enable greater institutional autonomy and enhance effective institutional management.

However, concern for educational reforms is still actual, and all the reforms so far have been perceived not unequivocally, with various interpretations and assessment. Therefore, in order to assess the effectiveness of such changes, there was a need for a sophisticated analysis of the whole situation.

Our general objective is to introduce Armenia's position between East and West conditioned by various historical, political situations, which very often becomes a cornerstone for many strategic choices and decisions in country's foreign policy in the field of education. The second objective is to assess the effects of recent educational reforms, their appropriateness and represent some obstacles hindering their smooth implementation.



Summary of previous research: Previous research and approaches to these reforms were mainly focused on obstacles and barriers to their adaptation because Armenian academic society and educational system are bearers of Soviet traditions. In many cases, they are not ready for particular changes not only in terms of resources or implementation but also from the perspective of a mindset. However, the purpose of this study is to provide a complex analysis and to shed light into all aspects of their appropriateness.

The study shows that Armenia's position between East and West has always been important in terms of strategic choices, and it is also reflected in its educational policy in the process of implementation of relevant reforms.

Besides, it makes clear that despite difficulties and challenges, the Bologna model was introduced and adapted with future perspectives of development and advancement.

Methodology. Current approaches and interpretations of educational reforms in Armenia – Bologna process and integration into the European educational area – are different in Armenian scientific literature. Discussions on Armenia's role between East and West also reflect various critical views. However, many of them agree with the fact that for the whole period of its existence, Armenia had to make its strategic choices and decisions depending on the historical and political situation. So the reforms occurred in the education system were also conducted with some political background and motivation.

The research methodology of this study involved the review of related literature, the examination of materials and educational standards in Armenia, Foreign Policy of Armenia in the field of education, Guidelines of Integration into European Educational Area, documents referring Armenia's joining Bologna process, as well as interviews with representatives of the academic society, discussions with a panel of scientists. The interviews to assess the level of effectiveness of educational reforms, their various interpretations were conducted by the author with 50 representatives: higher education experts, Government officials, the Armenian National Agency for Quality Assurance, Bologna Secretariat, management representatives of 2 private and 2 state Universities (including rectors, vice-rectors, deans, chairs and other administrative staff), academic staff and students.

The research sample:

- women/men from different age groups (from 20 to 65),
- number of respondents per institution (7).

Instruments and procedures (questions).

Result: The main findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

- *Interconnectivity of educational reforms and political processes.* The destiny of the higher education reforms in Armenia is relevant beyond the higher education sector. Similarly, if not even more than in the case of other countries of the region, what is happening in Armenian higher education is influenced by and has an impact on the geopolitical situation, on the ongoing reconstruction of national identity, on some of the basic structures of the society, as well as on the national economy. So, educational reforms are continuously accompanied by political processes being interconnected. The future of Armenia depends sensibly on the destiny of its higher education system.



- *Availability of expertise and resources for appropriate reforms.* Despite a somewhat tricky overall situation, there are significant developments and resources in the system that could be mobilized to promote positive change. Such developments and resources often tend to pass unnoticed, are misrepresented. Significant expertise and pressure for change have already accumulated within the system, generated in no small extent by the official program of reforms itself.

- *Low degree of support for "Bologna model" adaptation (30% of respondents).* The degree of support for the idea of a sophisticated reform program along the Bologna lines and "Bologna model" among a "majority of the representatives of academic society and officials is low. Many of them are inclined to support the idea of a return to the Soviet model in higher education, pointing to higher quality standards in Soviet times. The proportion of those committed to and working to promote the Bologna model and Bologna reforms is low. Their efforts are not insignificant, but they represent a minority.

Historically, Armenia is located at the junction of two civilizations – Western and Eastern. It has left a definite imprint on the mentality of Armenians. There is a certain ambivalence in the Armenian society: in everyday life, in the culture, the perception of the external world, politics. Becoming the first Christian country, Armenia took the first step in suspension from the East in 387, and the result of the internal and external struggle was the partition of Armenia between the Roman Empire (later Byzantium) and Parthia (Iran). Already in the late Middle Ages and in modern times, Armenia was trying desperately to get closer to Europe. Europeans perceived Armenians as eastern people. Moreover, the East considered Armenian people to be bearers of alien European culture. Armenian merchants were the most successful users of this dual perception and made quite decent property for those times. In the early 18th century Russian orientation emerged in the Armenian reality, which was perceived by Armenians still as European, although Russian itself had opened the first window to Europe not long ago due to the efforts of Peter the Great. First, with the help of European countries and then Russia, Armenia tried to escape from the Turkish-Iranian domination.

Then, approximately before the First World War, the Armenians had closest relations with Russia, and that was understandable in the era of Russian-Turkish and Russian-Persian wars. Besides, the Russian Empire wrested Eastern Armenia from Persia in 1828, (by the way, Russia had recaptured the part of Eastern Armenia – Karabakh – during the previous Russian-Persian war). Only with the victory of Bolshevism in Russia and the collapse of the empire, during the years of the Civil War in Russia Armenia once again reached out to Europe. Armenia lost its statehood in 1045 and was able to re-create it only in 1918. The first Armenian Republic (1918-1920), became an ally of the Entente. However, in December of 1920 Sovietization of Armenia occurred and it was proved to be the part of the USSR for 70 years. Even though with the help of Moscow and Kars Treaties with Turkey Russia tore Artsakh – Karabakh and Nakhichevan from Armenia, transferring them to the newly formed state Azerbaijan, Armenians continue regarding Russia as their chief military partner (let us not forget that in Western Armenia, which was part of Turkey, the first genocide of the 20th century occurred and Armenians have lost part of their historic homeland).

We outline the historical context in more detail so that modern political realities



can be understandable. At present, Armenia considers Russia as an important strategic partner and the main guarantor of its security. At the same time, in Armenia, European integration processes have intensively been occurring so far. Processes slowed slightly after an absolute pressure from Russia and intensification of the Eurasian Economic Community. On January 2 2015, Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). Despite Armenia's decision in September 2013 not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA), Armenia and the EU continue their political and trade dialogue in areas where this is compatible with Armenia's new obligations to the EEU. The EU and Armenia have completed their joint scoping exercise for a future legal agreement compatible with Armenia's new international obligations. (National Indicative Program, 2011-2013).

Geopolitics, like throughout the history of Armenia, is an integral part of our existence. Armenia has to be politically very flexible, to stay afloat. For Armenia, it is not just a question of economic development, but also the physical security considering that Armenia has no diplomatic relations with Turkey and is in a state of uneasy truce with Azerbaijan. The third neighbour of Armenia is Iran, which until recently has been blockaded by the Western powers, and the fourth – Georgia, which has constant problems with Russia.

Armenia has such an international position is that being surrounded by hostile and semi-hostile states it has to conduct foreign policy by more manoeuvring than pursuing any clear line according to its interests and national security. The declared policy of complementarity was the only way to stay afloat and in some way to become a bridge between the West and Russia. However, in reality, it does not look as it should be, and there are several reasons for this.

The main reason is the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which affects the trade-economic life of the republic, not in the best way. Having one secure land border – with Iran and not very secure one – with Georgia, the Armenian market does not have full exit to the world.

The geopolitical position of Armenia is quite tricky – the tense situation in the Middle East and a possible military strike on Iran can painfully respond both to Armenian communities of the region, and in Armenia itself as a whole.

Outflow from the endangered defeat of the Armenian community in Syria has already started, which previously occupied influential positions in the Syrian economy. In this regard, the country's foreign policy is based on the principle: nothing more. That is, Yerevan does not intervene, without a particular need of it, neither in the Syrian conflict nor in any confrontation between the West and Iran. A person could even say that in these matters Armenia behaves in a way adjusting to the Russian policy. Yerevan cannot act more accurately because of its weakness and a dependence on the US and the EU. Since gaining its independence, Armenia has pursued political and economic radical transformations in a very unfavourable international situation that has developed in the South Caucasus after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. (Grigoryan, 2013).



All this has a specific effect on the political priorities of Armenia and seeming inconstancy in matters of political partnership. Besides, we must note that massive migration flows from Armenia are going to Russia. According to unconfirmed reports, more than a million of our citizens are migrant workers in Russia. It is a significant resource for exerting political and economic pressure on Armenia – the country having a population of three million.

On the other hand, Armenia is a shining example in order to show that, if we exclude the superpowers' struggle for spheres of influence, the EU and the EEU can still be more placed in the Western model of civilization. Moreover, the processes taking place in the East, essentially create a threat to Europe, not only on its borders but also in Europe itself. Moreover, the threat is not only political and economic but also cultural.

Now, concerning education, again, we have to make a digression into history. The first mass schools in Armenia were connected with the creation of the Armenian alphabet in the 5th century. Moreover, in these schools, both boys and girls studied. For the Armenian people, being in a time ruled by Persia and Byzantium, education along with religion has become an essential component for the preservation of the nation. In the medieval history of Armenia, educational centres in monasteries played the role of universities where they were studying subjects identical to European ones. By the way, in the middle Ages, some impact on Armenia was rendered by the Arab renaissance. However, at a later time, after a long period of economic decline, the Armenian education system has fallen too. The new surge was connected with the Armenian education, which began not in Armenia but Armenian communities. So, in the 18th century, under the influence of English education Armenian community of India has experienced a renaissance and later on the Armenian social and political thought was influenced by the French education. Mkhitarjan's Education Center (Armenian Catholic religious order in Venice) even received the title of the Academy by order of Napoleon.

In the 19th century, there were no higher education institutions in Turkey, and Western intellectuals received higher education in Europe. Because in Russia, a few schools had robust national discrimination in admission to higher educational institutions, the part of the Eastern Armenian intelligent people also received higher education in Europe. By the way, the liberal wave in the half of the 19th century in this period reached Armenia.

European education for the Armenians has quite deep historical roots. Because Russia adopted the educational system from Prussia, and the USSR still, though under different ideological reasons, has kept it, at the same time making it mass, one can understand the high educational level of the Armenians. In terms of higher education, Armenia has been one of the leading Soviet republics.

After the collapse of the Soviet system, the Bologna Process became a massive factor for Armenia. It became a strong euro integrating factor, and not only in the education sphere but also in political and cultural ones. There are no other questions discussed so actively in academic circles today in Armenia as the educational reforms – the Bologna process and its consequences for the Armenian Higher Education. A country, which has a 1600-year-old history of literacy, where the education has always been prioritized, and the school has been the cornerstone of the nation's



political and cultural survival, and the incentive for national progress is today back at the bottom of the ladder. After the collapse of the central planning system, the Armenian society inherited a distorted, inefficient and obsolete national economy. Fundamental reformations of the country's political and economic system became necessary to meet the needs of the changing world and respond to new economic conditions. Obviously, in the educational sphere, too, the changes were inevitable. Armenia faced a problem of developing the national school and creating its peculiar system of education. Through the years of transition, the higher education system in Armenia has undergone significant transformations. On the one hand, the system had to resist to the upheavals of transition: the multi-fold cuts of state financing due to the economic crisis, the poverty of the population and severe social polarization, a dramatic drop in the labour market demand and, at the same time, it had to adequately adjust its educational system to the new social and economic conditions and allocate local resources effectively. Several reform processes which are in line with the present Bologna objectives started in Armenia in early 90s, long before joining the Bologna declaration (Hunanyan, 2010, p. 168-169).

What is now called the Bologna Process in Armenia has been at the heart of the official higher education reform program launched in 2005.

In the Armenian reality, as in other countries, the "Bologna Process" is at the same time a simple and complex concept. Moreover, the significance and meaning of the Bologna process are interpreted differently by various interested organizations, individuals and groups. In the Armenian reality, the significance of the "Bologna Process" can be interpreted as follows:

- *European integration mechanism:* Joining the Bologna Process in Bergen in 2005, expressing a desire to become part of the European Higher Education Area, Armenia has, in effect, announced its intention to be closer to Europe. Participation in the Bologna Process allowed Armenia to enter not only higher education but also a political field, which was an alternative to the former Soviet Union. Today, too, cooperation and integration with the EU is an essential item on the country's foreign policy agenda. The Bologna Process is a precondition for European integration. The government, in turn, links it to its international reputation, particularly at a stage, until 2015, when Armenia chaired the Bologna Secretariat for the entire European Higher Education Area (47 countries).

- *The "only" model of reform.* The Bologna Process has been adopted as the official program for the reform of the higher education sector in Armenia. Moreover, even those individuals and organizations, who negatively assess the course of reforms, criticize the government's approach to their implementation, during the interviews, they admitted that the Bologna process has no alternative in reforming the higher education system.

- *Opportunity to evaluate financial resources.* The Bologna Process, and the main result expected from it, the creation of a pan-European higher education area, has always inspired Armenia by offering new models or models of higher education. For example, Armenia has adopted scientific degrees Bologna structure, European transfer of educational points or Bologna model (ECTS), quality assurance system formation guidelines and or the principles and practices of student mobility and flow. At



the same time, the Bologna Process provided an excellent opportunity to attract significant financial resources to implement reforms, not just from Europe.

- *A political tool that can be used at the national, regional and international levels.* The Bologna Process and Reforms serve as a Means of Political Legitimacy, both Domestically and Internationally. The government's interest in the Bologna Process and its political dividends was also since the government initiated to be a host country for the Bologna Secretariat until 2015. It was somehow an expression of political will of getting closer to European educational area. It was a serious step, which had both regional and European significance, and it implied particular material, professional, administrative and political obligations for the state. At present, the work of the Bologna Secretariat is excellently organized in Armenia and is staffed with highly qualified specialists. Being a host country for the Bologna Secretariat opened up a wide range of opportunities for Armenia, including advancing reforms.

- *Window to the world.* At least one clear advantage is that for many, entering the field of pan-European, higher education allows education, particularly Armenian students, theoretically benefit from this stable and secure window to the larger world. It is not a small thing. There was such a window in the Soviet Union. However, that window was partially closed after the collapse of the Union. The area of pan-European higher education significantly expands the former horizons, allowing Armenia and Armenian students to avoid isolation.

- *A tool for establishing a new identity.* The first supporters of the Bologna reforms in Armenia were a group of scientists and administrators. In the Bologna Process, they saw an opportunity to create a new national identity for Armenia and to replace the "Soviet" with the "European". To achieve this, radical changes were needed in the higher education system. The issue of creating a new Europeanized national identity through the Bologna Process remains on the agenda, but there is no universal approach on the part of various stakeholders, including government agencies. From time to time, this idea is questionable set by individual students, lecturers, and parents who, albeit vaguely, speak in favour of returning to the Soviet model. According to them, such a return will put an end to the continuing degradation of the higher education system, which many believe did not stop after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They also claim that the Soviet model of higher education was the best. During the interviews, other compelling circumstances arose in connection with this issue of identity formation. Thus, the representative of the university founded by the Moscow government in Yerevan noted that in order to be competitive in Armenia, the university should manifest itself as sufficiently "Armenian". Furthermore, in order to achieve this goal, the university voluntarily joined the Bologna process by adopting the Bologna model. In other words, in this case, becoming Armenian means becoming in line with the European or European model (Matei, Iwinska & Geven, 2013, p. 12-13).

Briefly assessing, we can identify the following positive shifts:

- *Creating a single European Higher Education Area in the context of the Bologna Process* (in which, though more slowly, Russia is being involved too, which is very important for Armenia), the creation of a pan-European ECTS system;



– *Dissemination through the formation of European culture* (there certainly can play a crucial role how many people in Armenia have passed the European School. Tangible change can only occur in case of the formation of a critical mass);

– *Development of civil society* (European integration processes contribute to this). For a more tangible effect, there are some obstacles:

- The small labour market in Armenia.
- Migration, which does not contribute to the consolidation of the citizens that are committed to democratic reforms/receiving good education in Europe, young people, unable to find work in Armenia in conformity with the qualification, basically leave the country.
- The policy of the European countries, hindering the free movement to Europe and back; although in recent years the European embassies in Armenia have facilitated admission policy, still it remains an obstacle for broader cultural exchange.
- There is a language barrier. The language policy of general secondary education does not create an appropriate framework for a more comprehensive exchange of students and professionals.

However, Armenia's integration into the European educational area is exacerbated by several factors:

➤ Intensive reform of the educational system followed by the commercialization of education and increasing competition in the market of educational services, contradictions and inconsistencies of methodologies for higher and secondary schools.

➤ Change of the priority demands of the labour market for not so much towards the demand of knowledge, skills and abilities of the specialist, as defined instrumental, interpersonal, systemic and professional competencies, needed to successfully and quickly adapt to the workplace.

➤ Radical transformations on the labour market, as evidenced by the market research of its current state and predictive analysis of the next decade, during which the projected demand for about 10 thousand new specialities is predicted.

➤ The intense pace of renovation and transformation of the information that becomes irrelevant even during one academic cycle.

➤ “Mercantilism” and “performative nature” of the knowledge, i.e. utilitarian and pragmatic approach to them and assessment solely from economic expediency and efficiency.

➤ The conflict between the new social needs of the society and established organizational structures of the educational system.

Discussion. The findings of the research are based on the official data, strategic documentation and empirical data, with the help of which we tried to assess the current state of educational reforms in Armenia, the nature of their interpretations and degree of satisfaction with resulting changes among academic society and different stakeholders, as well as factors causing strategic decisions in the field of higher education being influenced with or conditioned by the political situation.

Some of the researchers and academics are not sure about the appropriateness and impact of the educational reforms in the national system of higher education, believing that the Soviet model is the best for our system; however, we have pointed



out the positive shifts and trends observed so far highlighting all the benefits. They will play a crucial role in academic society by introducing the best European practice.

Armenia has already accumulated substantial experience, potential and resources in this field. Being a reservoir of brilliant academics and other professionals of the field, having the prospects for this remarkable pool of talent to realize themselves at home, it just needs to conduct significant reforms within and outside higher education to provide them with new more extensive opportunities of functioning and considering that “open window to the world” not as an option of migration, but as a tool of adapting the best practice and experience, advancing national system of higher education.

Conclusion: Summarizing we can say that as one of the post-Soviet countries, Armenia’s experience is an exciting example. Unlike other South Caucasian states, Armenia's specificity is in the fact that it is under a strong influence of Russia. In Georgia, the Americanization process passed more quickly (by the way; as a result, it had territorial losses). In Azerbaijan rapid Islamization takes place, although it depends on the European policy towards Turkey, as Turkey's influence on this country is particularly high.

Being in the sphere of the political influence of Russia, Armenia still is successfully implementing the European integration policy in the sphere of education. A new impetus was the establishment of the Foundation “Education quality assurance centre” in 2008 at the Government of the Republic of Armenia. Since 2009, education quality assurance structures were established in higher education institutions of the republic, the process of institutional accreditation according to the European criteria and standards launched. It contributes to better integration. Because institutional accreditation was compulsory and all universities should have passed it until 2018, it becomes clear to what extent the education system in Armenia might be Europeanized. In Armenia, there are many students from India, Iran and the Arab countries. Many students from the Armenian Diaspora of these countries also receive education in Armenia. Education in Armenia is much cheaper than in Europe, and besides, unlike many neighbouring countries, according to interviews conducted with international students in universities, it is a friendly country. Interlacement of Eastern and Western cultures make it the most suitable country for many students from the East. Given this circumstance, Russia also has intensified its policy in the field of education in Armenia by opening the Armenian branch of Moscow State University. It means that education is more and more increasing its role in geopolitical processes.

Also, despite all formal difficulties, challenges and rooted mindset Bologna reforms have been conducted with a rather uncompromising approach and willingness of proper introduction, automatically leading to accumulation of high expertise and resources. What about inclinations towards former soviet educational model dominating among representatives of academic society, they have yet to pass the test of time to change inner convictions and attitudes which will gradually and unconsciously be shaped by ongoing positive changes: more extensive opportunities, unlimited mobility, financing and advancement.



Generally, the opposition of Europe and Asia, suggests more ancient and general opposition – East and West. This opposition reflects the whole orientation of a person in the world around and not only in a geographical aspect. Moreover, the nature and limits of the principle of the East-West division of the world are due to a person, his active and aggressive exploration of the world. At the same time, if the boundary between Europe and Asia might move slightly in one direction or another in the imagination of geographers, politicians and inhabitants of border areas, the boundary between the West and the East is much more flexible and mobile. Nevertheless, surprisingly, the movement of this boundary does not seem to occur without the participation of Armenians. No matter how different were the movements, their result was the same: wherever moved movable boundary between East and West, Armenians and Armenia somehow mysteriously appeared there, as if waiting for the movement to become a mediator between a new distributed east and west. Usually, this happens against their will. Armenians as if doomed to become mediators, sometimes it takes the form of a choices political strategies, such as in the case of modern Armenia's ambiguous position mediating between Iran (south-east) and Russia (north-west), to the displeasure of the West, especially the United States. (Abrahamyan, 2006, 17).

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