

**THE BALKANS – PART OF RIMLAND!
THROUGH THE VIEWFINDER OF RISK, THREATS AND
CHALLENGES IN CONTINUING COLD WAR**

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Abstract

Cold war never ended. After the collapse of the SSSR, the former Soviet republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were annexed by NATO. Also, former communist states Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia were annexed by NATO. According to the conclusion of the NATO summit in Warsaw, it was noted that Georgia, Ukraine and Macedonia are the future countries that should join to the Alliance. Through NATO, the United States continued to implement Spykman theory, according to which "Who controls the Rimland rules (Heartland) Eurasia, who rules Heartland controls the destinies of the world". Balkan region for its geostrategic position, its mixed multi-ethnic structure, is one out of the three regions in Rimland that there have been disagreements continuously along ethnic and religious ground, the nationalism and conflicts often developed into mass bloodshed. The other two regions with similar characteristics are the Middle East and Asian Balkans (countries of Central Asia). It has

not been disputed the fact that tendency of the imperialist forces is through conflict to dominate and control these crossroads. With controls of these three regions US will rule economic development of Heartland. Tendency of the Balkans region is to preserve peace and stability and to minimize the crises that can grow into wars. For this purpose, it is necessary to ensure security cooperation, mutual respect and tolerance, as well as economic development.

If we take into account "South Stream" agreement that signed between Balkans countries and Russia from one side and Chinese Silk Road (speed train line between Athens-Skopje-Belgrade and Budapest) then we can expect that the Balkans could again be destabilized through the old initial caps such as ethnic nationalism, various revolutions, unstable governments and so on. What will be new risks, threats and challenges for the Balkan region in recent tectonic shifts in the international political scene, will be the main subject of this paper.

Key words: *Balkans, security, threats, risks, Rimland, Cold War*

1. INTRODUCTION

The turmoil and the tectonic shifts on the international political scene have increased the activity of the Balkan volcano. The transition period from hegemony to multipolar order transforms the Balkan region into a chessboard on which the big kings (centers of power) tactically maneuver to conquer zones of influence and interest (Zakaria, 2008). According to its geostrategic position, its mixed and metastasized multiethnicity, the Balkan region represents one of three regions on this planet in which there is constant ethnic and religious friction, nationalism and conflicts which frequently turn into mass bloodshed. The two other regions with similar characteristics are the Middle East and the Asiatic Balkans (countries of Central Asia) (Brezinski, 2016).

The Balkans, said Winston Churchill, "Produce more history than they can consume" (Tharoor, 2012). From a historical perspective, no Balkan alliance has lasted more than one use. The constant clashes of the big centers of power and the shifting of their aspirations also reflect a regrouping of the Balkan geopolitical constellation. Although the West is usually pragmatic in leaving the solution of the problems to the

leading politicians, Balkan people are responsible for their future embracing everything foreign as positive, and everything Balkan as negative. This constellation, together with the poor perception of democracy, coexistence in a multiethnic frame, made a negative perception and connotation of the term “Balkans”.

The revision of Balkan history is the principle reason for the intervention of the big centers of power. Their egoistic right, as alleged foreign and “neutral” factors, to decide the future of the region in favor of peace and democracy is a cause for internal divisions, spreading of hatred and intolerance, and rising nationalism, making the region a source of instability and a security problem.

The Balkans has directly affected by many developments in the world, especially due to its geographical location. Throughout history, the safety of the Balkans has always been in risk. Firstly, the developments and war in the Middle East have been threatening the Balkans security. In other words particularly, the participation of foreign warriors in the IS terrorist organization more than other religious oriented organisations and the involvement of some Balkan citizens to IS creates a risk to the Balkans, who have a serious Muslim population. Moreover, the immigration that occurred as a result of the war in the Middle East and the EU's closed-door policy has begun to create a refugee problem in the Balkans. For the Balkan states, which have not been members of the EU, and have economical problems, refugees could be become a serious risk. Finally, the threat of ethnic nationalism, which always threatens the security of the Balkans and always stands at a sensitive point and reminds itself at certain intervals, has begun to come into view again. In this context, in this study the vulnerability of the stability and security of the Balkan states, which had been supposed to have stabilized until now, will be examined within the framework of new security risks.

2. THE BALKANS – PART OF RIMLAND

According to Mackinder, “Who rules Central and Eastern Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island personified by Eurasia. Who rules Eurasia commands the World(Mackinder, 1904).



Picture 1: Rimland and Heartland

After the end of World War II, Mackinder's theory was modified by the American political scientist, Nicholas Spykman. According to Spykman, the strip of coastal land that encircles Eurasia (called Rimland) is more important than the central Asian zone (Heartland) for the control of the Eurasian continent. The concept of Rimland was divided into three sections:

- Control of the European coast land;
- Control of the Arabian-Middle East desert land; and
- Control of the Asiatic monsoon land.

Control of these regions implies control of the sea routes that lead from/towards Eurasia. From an economic aspect, the control of ports and sea routes implies control of the economic development of Eurasia. And according to Spykman, "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia. Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world"(Melton, n.d.).

Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union heralded the end of the Cold War, NATO's subsequent moves proved the opposite. In a period when Russia was on its knees, several former Soviet Republics joined NATO (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia). In Southern Europe, NATO's expansion continued with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia also became member states. And, at the Warsaw Summit, NATO recognized three aspiring members: Georgia, Ukraine, and

Macedonia(Erdem, 2010). Thereby, USA through its NATO instrument should control the eastern borders of Russia, or as Halford Mackinder calls it "Heartland".

Following that theory, Balkan region is de facto part of Rimland and part of Europe. Much of the Balkan countries are absorbed into the European Union and NATO. At this periodBalkan region is a battleground on which the major centers of power (USA - politically and Russia and China - economically) will impose their influence.But our opinion is that the Balkan region should focus on Europe and the European Union. On the other hand, in the new strategic document of the European Union, the Global Strategy for the EU in the area of common and foreign policy, Balkan regions took strategic importance. In this case, the EU should show more agility and determination in terms of strategic interests, primarily for its internal stability and security.For this purpose, a stable Balkans means a stable Europe. The European Union should directly involve its impact on the democratization processes and the provision of stable governments (EU, 2016).

3. CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCE AND STRATEGIES OF BIG POWERS

Throughout history, Balkan geography has always been the focus of great powers. Especially ethnic and religious diversity in this region has become one of the most important tools that can be used to disrupt the stability of the region. The Balkans, which remained between the two poles during the Cold War period, had not reached a stable post-Cold War era, and had a difficult time in ethnic and religious conflicts. Especially in the period of Yugoslavia's disintegration, beside the EU, which could not show its expected activity and power, and adding Russia, which was dealing with internal confusion, resulted as USA had serious effects on the region. In addition to corruption and constant political instability problems, the Balkan region has always been the chessboard of great powers. On the other hand there is rising power, China, who has seen the Balkan territory as an important economic market sometimes make economic alliances with Russia for gaining advantage. So, today Balkan geography is always important for Russia, China, EU and USA.

Because of its close historical and cultural ties with Balkan States, Russia has always used its influence in that region (Strafor Worldview, 2015). There is two main reason for Russian continues influence in the region. First one is against Western

influence in Balkans, despite the Cold War was finish years ago. The Second one has been the implementing of the energy strategies of Russia. In recent years, for increasing Russian influence in region again Putin started to awake Russian and Serbianpan-Slavic link between Orthodox Christian cousins in the Balkans.Using this historical or cultural influence, it is also easier for Russia to use the region to realize its economic strategies.

Although the West invested to Balkans for over years, Russia has also had several regional energy assets and hold several outstanding loans to Balkan governments increased its influence (Strafor Worldview, 2015). Balkan geography has been seen as an alternative route to Ukraine, especially in the relocation of Russian gas to Europe. After crises with Ukraine, Russia started to search new routes for its gas market in Europe. In this search, Turkey came out to the stage and after the long-standing surging relations, Turkish Stream project signed between Turkey and Russia in October 2016, which could be defined as the transferring of Russian gas to Europe via the Black Sea and Turkey's territories. Thus, Russia has both able to make gas transfers easily, and become one step closer to the European market that it has always aimed to be a part of it.



Picture 2: Turkish Gas Stream Map (SigmaLive, 2015).

A similar situation to the economic objectives of Russia is valid for China, one of the rising powers. Because of the recent increase in production and economic

developments China has to be find a new market for itself beyond Asia. The European market, where production costs are high, has become an important market for China, which can keep costs down in every sense.China has achieved its plan to reach the European market both by railroad and by seaway with the new silk road project.



Picture 3: New Silk Road (Newage, 2017)

China's One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) initiative is the most ambitious infrastructure project for the region. OBOR includes immense network of planned highways, railways, energy grids and port facilities that will create economic corridors between 65 countries in Asia, Africa and Europe (Capri, 2017). Starting in 2013, the initiative aims to create new trade routes, lines and jobs to connect China with Asia, Europe and Transition Economies better and more effectively through 5 Routes. The carrying out of the initiative began in 2015. However, the application of this project to cover all the targeted countries will be possible in the long run. If the project can be fully implemented as intended, many countries and regions will benefit from it. This project focuses on surface transportation as railway and highway connecting China to Europe via Central Asia and Russia. It is aimed at linking China with West Asia via Central Asia, and linking China with South East Asia through South Asia and India. The goals of maritime transport are to link China with the Indian Ocean to Europe and to link China with the South Pacific Ocean (Hong Kong-China). Outside of China, this initiative will be speed up the flow of trade and created new markets and jobs by

lowering shipping costs for all relevant countries. It will also contribute to the development of emerging countries. This initiative will also make an additional contribution to the increase in the amount transported. The connection of the Indian Ocean and Suez Canal with China's sea route to Piraeus Port⁵⁹ (Greece) will create a new alternative to the Antwerp Port of Belgium, the Hamburg Port of Germany, and the Port of Rotterdam of the Netherlands. Thus, a 10-day savings will be provided for transportation from China to East and Central Europe. Invested Projects in China's OBOR Framework in Europe are capacity increase and improvement of Piraeus port, Hungarian-Serbia speed rail line, China-Spain freight railway (Kaptan Haber, 2017).

In the Balkans, Piraeus port link with Central Europe and Germany. Turkey and Cyprus, respectively, are part of the Silk Road's overland and maritime approaches to Greece. The Balkans, Turkey, and Cyprus all welcome investment from and trade with China, and China's economic relations with all the Balkan countries are increasing. Also economic relations are mainly approached on a bilateral basis, the CEEC 16+1 (CEEC 16+1, 2017) platform provides an extra way for China-Balkans cooperation. In the short term, it's expected that the geopolitical influence of China in Southeast Europe and Turkey will probably remain limited than EU, USA and Russia but in the longer run, China may develop into a more significant geopolitical actor in the region (Putten & Ham, 2016).

On the other hand, Balkan territory is always important for Western world. European governments have two major goals in the Balkans: to maintain stability in the western part of the region and to minimize Russian influence. For over ten years western Balkans because of the EU membership has been left under the supervision of the union. For supporting stability, the EU has used considerable amounts of resources for bringing reform and economic development to the region (Strafor Worldview, 2015). However, the other non-EU Balkan countries Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia have little economic and political progress.

Together with the unexpected consequences of the Syrian civil war, beside stability, the most important perception of the EU towards the Balkans-especially non-EU Balkan countries- in recent years is related with the refugee crisis.

⁵⁹ Greece's largest port Piraeus, near capital Athens, was privatized and sold to China's Cosco Group Limited in 2016.

Countries in the Western Balkans have been on the forefront of international migrant crisis since May 2015. In this "Balkan migration route", there are thousands of displaced persons have mostly arrived from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, fleeing war. European Union has used its financial assistance and expertise however the largest brunt of the crisis fell on the shoulders of Serbia and Macedonia and also Turkey, last stops before the Schengen area. When the arrival of refugees in Hungary (first EU member along the route), they requested asylum, and were accommodated in exiting refugee centres. People migrating to the EU are categorised as either: an asylum-seeker, a refugee, a beneficiary of subsidiary protection, an irregular immigrant or a legal immigrant. According to Frontex data, both the number of illegal border crossings and loss of life on the Western Balkans route has seen a tragic increase in 2016 (Frontex, 2017). De facto closure of the Western Balkan route in March 2016 left thousands stranded in Serbia and Macedonia and its expected that these numbers are triple during this year. It is difficult to assess for Western Balkan countries would cope with the situation without any assistance. There is some amount of financial assistance in the framework of Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe (RMRP) covering Turkey, Southern Europe, Western Balkans however, it will not be enough especially if the situation will be continue in Middle East (European Western Balkans, 2017).

Discussions are underway on what will happen to refugee policy in Europe, while some governments are urged to take strict measures in this regard. Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz argued that they need to establish refugee centers outside the European Union (EU) borders in March 2017. According to Kurz, "We need refugee centers to work with the UN refugee commission outside the EU," and that the centers are not important where they are, and that they would be used to protect and repatriate people who are "illegally" entering Europe. Kurz suggested establishing Egypt, Georgia and the Western Balkans for refugee centers, and the Mediterranean route should be closed to "illegal immigrants" (AB Haber, 2017).

It is seen that the biggest and negative effect of the closed-door policy, that the EU implements in the period after the Syrian civil war is in the Balkan geography. Already in this geography where different ethnic and religious groups have come together throughout history, there is a risk that such kind of immigration movements and immigrants who must to be stay in that region, in some way can be changed demographic structure of the region. Such a demographic change could create new

crises in the Balkans. However, it should be taken into consideration by the EU that the Balkans are no longer in a position to endure a new dispute.

The relationship of the USA with the Balkans is based on different bases. For the United States, the Balkans are not backyards like the EU, but should not be surprised by the presence of the United States in every region historically Russia wants to influence. The USA has been involved in the internal politics of the Balkans by NATO in the aftermath of the Bosnian war and the conflict in Kosovo in the 1990s. In addition, there has been new NATO members after cold war, who were the supporters of Soviet Union in previous. The most important aim of the US on the Balkan territories is to minimize the economic and cultural Russian influence in the region. Because, as mentioned above, the European market is very important for both Russia and China, which is a rising power, and the Balkan's is defined as the gateway of Russia and China to Europe. An economically strengthened Russia means Russia, which has more say in international politics. Even if the Cold War is over, the opposition between the United States and Russia today continues through some new geographies, such as the Syrian civil war.

It is obvious that the US, which has held the title of being the only superpower for many years after the Cold War, will take different measures against the new rising powers and will not give up easily. On the other hand, however, it should be taken into consideration that this influence on the Balkans could be made through the Western alliance, and also leave the region primarily to the larger states of the EU, rather than directly influencing it. An increase the Russian influence in the Balkans, jeopardize Britain's position as the leading anti-Russian European power and make a joint British and French soft power strategy in the former Yugoslav republics more likely (Ademovic, 2016).

In this context, it could be said that for both geostrategic, cultural and economic reasons, Russia has never lost interest in the Balkans. The most important economic goal of Russia and China is to enter the European market and for that reason the Balkan Gate is very important for them. It is also important to bear in mind that Russia and China have good relations with Middle Eastern politics. But it is impossible to imagine that the accounts on the Balkan geography are over. Because, throughout history, it is necessary not to forget the existence of "Western" forces who want to have dominion over this region.

4. WHY IS AN UNSTABLE REGION NECESSARY – LESSON LEARNED/NOT LEARNED FORM YUGOSLAVIA?

To answer the question of who needs an unstable Balkans we will consider the story of Yugoslavia. From a European success story after World War II, the breakup of Yugoslavia was a process that suddenly turned into an experiment (pilot project) which subsequently will be applied in other regions of the world.

In order to restrain and stop the aggressive Germany, the great Western powers, France and Great Britain, laid the foundations of Yugoslavia according to the provisions of the Corfu Declaration. Occupying the former territories of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empire, Yugoslavia united all South Slavs in one country. United in one country, South Slavs won't be an easy prey for the imperialist goals which use the divide and conquer strategy. In its Constitutional order, Yugoslavia greatly resembled Great Britain.

With the foundation of the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia became an important actor on the international scene. The purpose of this movement is to ensure the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries in their struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics⁶⁰(World Review, 2013). This movement advocated an independent development of the states, rejecting any kind of foreign influence and interference. This strategy of the Non-Aligned Movement wasn't favourable to the Great powers' strategy of ideological wars by absorbing the weak states. To that end, this movement should have been dissolved and Yugoslavia divided, in order to weaken the individual states and subsequently absorb them under the ideology of the Great powers. In fact, that was just one reason.

On the other hand, the rate of economic growth and development of Yugoslavia, especially after World War II, put her on the high 24th place in the ranking of world economies. If we compare this data to the report for 2015, Montenegro is

⁶⁰ In a speech given during the Havana Declaration of 1979, Fidel Castro said. For detailed information please;

<http://cns.miis.edu/nam/documents/Official_Document/6th_Summit_FD_Havana_Declaration_1979_Whole.pdf>

ranked 149th, Macedonia 130th, Bosnia and Herzegovina 112th, Serbia 87th, Slovenia 81st, and Croatia 76th (World Bank, 2015). In that time the state had a dominant share in all joint-stock companies, an unimaginable thing for Western democracy. Therefore, the state had a complete control over the companies, and transferring capital out of the country was impossible. Exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies was also forbidden. To that end, the breakup of Yugoslavia into smaller states with weaker economies should enable:

- The states to be incapable of independent development (need for interdependence, globalization, and democracy);
- The collapsed economies and natural resources to be available to the big multinational companies and financial institutions;
- Impoverishment of the population;
- Literate and fit for work people to be forced to work for minimum wage.
- Closing of factories from all economic and industrial spheres in order to neutralize their competition to the Western corporations.

All above mentioned facts were also conditions that opened the door to foreign capital and to the takeover of the large factories by Western corporations. Naturally, for all this to happen Yugoslavia must be dissolved.

From a security point of view, the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia represented a perpetuation of the imperialist powers' strategy, above all NATO and the EU, for absorbing the dissolved states as a counterweight to the Russian power bloc. Slovenia and Croatia are already member states of NATO and the EU, Montenegro will become a part of NATO this year and should start accession negotiations with the EU. From a security perspective the goal is simple, neutralizing Russia's influence over these countries. In the meantime, the parliamentary elections held in Montenegro were also a referendum for determining the future direction of this country, the EU, NATO, or Russia.

On the other hand, by its strategic position, the Balkans is the main crossroads between Europe and the Near East in both directions. Undoubtedly, the tendency of imperialistic powers is to dominate and control these crossroads. Worthy of note is the so-called "Diagonal road", composed of Vienna-Belgrade-Skopje-Sophia-Istanbul. This road is an overland route towards the Orient for Europe, a gateway towards Europe for

the near and Middle East. Consequently, the power that dominates will have the greatest benefit.

5. THE SPREAD OF NATIONALISM INSTEAD OF DEMOCRACY AND PROSPERITY

The building of strong national identity within the frames of good interneighbor and interethnic relations is nothing more than rubbing the lamp from which the genie of war impatiently waits to come out. And the venomous memory of the wars from the 1990's is an additional spark that could light the fuse.

More than 25 years after the breakup of the federation and the division into blocs, the Western Balkan countries still have the capacity to follow retrograde policy instead of integrative. Talking about federalization and separatist ideas as substitutes for prosperity and democracy, better life, employment and economic development, serves as a powerful tool for spreading fear and keeping people under control. Macedonian folk dance "three steps forward, two steps back" is an embodiment of Balkan politics in the last few years. When things start to get better, such as employment, economic and consumption growth, the development of social policy etc., politicians always remind people that these achievements are thanks to the patriots and ultranationalists whose politics led to this situation. This situation is an impetus and a basis for presenting an election program that should bring about a good result, i.e. a victory on the next elections or referenda.

However, it is obvious that corruption, crime, poor economic results, as well as poverty could be easily forgotten by fueling nationalist and interethnic passions, looking for foreign enemies, keeping people in constant fear of new interneighbor and interethnic conflict.

Although it looked like a Star Wars plot, the arms race between Croatia and Serbia served as fodder for media close to the leading parties in both countries and was used for intensifying national rhetoric and making political points, in order to spark a verbal war between Belgrade and Zagreb in which there was a witch-hunt for spies on both sides that subsided after the referendum in RepublikaSrpska. While this referendum was denounced and declared illegitimate by the United States and the EU, including neighboring Croatia, it was not denounced by the Republic of Serbia. We must

mention here the incident with the Serbian train emblazoned with nationalist graffiti which was heading to KosovskaMitrovica. Such provocation further worsened the frail relations between Belgrade and Pristina. All these events resulted with rising nationalism before the Serbian elections that produced a change, i.e. the current prime minister became a new president.

Secret services and mercenaries, threatened national identity, federalization, threats from neighboring countries, protests "For" and "Against" putting religious symbols and erecting national monuments, as well as making public threats and calls for lynching of "traitors" are pretexts for creating political crisis, and represent a perfect recipe for an unstable country in which nationalism is the main course for the impoverished people. In the case of the Republic of Macedonia there was a situation in which neighboring countries Albania and Kosovo directly interfered in the domestic policy of the country. The creation of the so-called "Tirana platform" by the Albanian prime minister and the four Albanian political parties in Macedonia, during an election process in Albania, may only bring political points to the current prime minister of Albania, but will not resolve the political crisis in Macedonia. This platform fueled the nationalist aspirations in Macedonia. Although the referendum in RepublikaSrpska was condemned by the United States and the EU, the platform and the meddling of neighboring countries in the domestic affairs of Macedonia were not, which reveals the double standards on the international scene.

CONCLUSION

The transition from hegemony to multipolar order was announced in 2007 during the Munich conference when Russia liberated from the yoke of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, was launched as an important player on the geopolitical stage. Russian intervention in Syria marked the global American hegemony era and the beginning of preparations for the construction of a new multipolar world.

According to its geostrategic position, its mixed and metastasized multiethnicity, the Balkan region represents most neuralgic geographical point on the planet where the most geopolitical interests collide in one place. The turmoil and the tectonic shifts on the international political scene have increased the activity of the

Balkan volcano. Seen geographically, the Balkans is part of an area called Rimlend. Domination and control of that area means greater control of Heartland - ie Russia.

Rise of Russia and the establishment of significant relations with Balkan countries, while building economic, energy, political and civilizational interests and influences are key elements for her return on the big stage. The impact on the Balkans through stirring up old conflicts on religious and ethnic basis will cause a serious impact to Russia's interests for Balkans and for its strategic connection with the European subcontinent. From that aspect, Macedonia and Serbia are very important for Russia. According to the geographical positions of these two countries, they are located in the central part of the Balkans. One of the main drawbacks is access to the open seas. These two countries are the Balkan Heartland (Milevski T. & Sharevski M., 2014). The states that surround Balkan Heartland are Balkan Rimlend. Balkan Rimlend consists of NATO members: Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. Together with Hungary as a NATO member, Balkan Heartland is completely surrounded by anti-Russian influence. Any instability in the Balkan Heartland will cause impact on Russia. But here we must not forget China, which also has economic interests in the Balkans, including the areas of Heartland and Rimlend. China has a new economic - development policy geared towards Europe. Any instability in the Balkan Heartland will cause impact on her economic plans. As we know, China logistic supports Russian intervention in Syria. This means that China will continue to help Russia on the Balkans. The core of the Heartland occupies the triangle Shar Planina Mountain - Skopska Crna Gora Mountain, Pristina and Presevo. It is the geographical core of the Balkan Heartland which binds currently Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo and has the potential to affect the entire Balkans. Considering the events that took place the last two or three years in the Balkans, the building of strong national identity within the frames of good interneighbor and interethnic relations is nothing more than rubbing the lamp from which the genie of war impatiently waits to come out.

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