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Security Provision in and beyond Europe: transformed narratives and roles in times of interregnum

Sarah Wolff (Leiden University), Karolina Pomorska (University of Leiden)
Richard G. Whitman (University of Kent)

200 words abstract

Current geopolitics are shifting, with experts debating whether it should be understood as a multiplex world order, times of interregnum or a rupture for middle powers. Security provision - understood here as the collective act of supplying security for oneself and others, typically at a regional or global level - is undergoing times of transformation. The escalation of wars in Ukraine, Gaza and Iran have profoundly disrupted and reconfigured regional security arrangements both within and beyond Europe. This special section seeks to evidence what role conceptualisations, narratives and perceptions are at play in a period of geopolitical interregnum. It makes four main contributions. First, the notion of 'permanent emergency' is a structuring condition for European security provision with a continuous adaptation in which the interregnum is not a transitional passage to a new stable order but a durable feature of the international environment. This explains why narratives on security provision have become more fluid and can co-exist in spite of normative divergences. Second socialisation around security provision shows that informalisation and social power remain key elements. Third, the agency of third countries as recipients of narratives is key in their success.

Current geopolitics are shifting, with experts debating whether it should be understood as a multiplex world order,¹ times of interregnum² or a rupture for middle powers.³ Security provision - understood here as the collective act of supplying security for oneself and others, typically at a regional or global level - , is also undergoing transformation.. Unlike the analysis of security complexes or architecture, which focuses primarily on self-defence, security provision has an inherently collective dimension. Following the definition of provision in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary,⁴ it involves both a sense of preparation and of collective, since provision is about 'the act of supplying somebody with something that they need or want; something that is supplied' but it is also about 'The action or an act of providing, preparing, or arranging in advance; the fact or condition of being prepared or made ready beforehand; preparation' in the Oxford English Dictionary.⁵

¹ Acharya, A. (2017). After liberal hegemony: The advent of a multiplex world order. *Ethics & international affairs*, 31(3), 271-285.

² Ó Rálaigh, C. (2025). Interrogating the Interregnum. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 13684310251367363.

³ Carney, M. (2026, January 20). *Principled and pragmatic: Canada's path: Prime Minister Carney addresses the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting* [Speech transcript]. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>

⁴ Oxford Learners' Dictionaries. Retrieved May 18, 2026, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/provision_1

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary. (2000). Oxford University Press. <http://dictionary.oed.com>

In the past, debates on security provision abroad, beyond Europe, led to the conclusion that it would require 'denser, more institutionalized forms of collaboration and regulation in both [the EU and NATO]'. However, it was also pointed out that more informalisation could also mean a dilution or even undermining of institutional security provision.⁶ Since Brexit and the subsequent Russia's war in Ukraine, we see that institutionalisation has been challenged with a withdrawal of the UK from European security provision coordination structures. At the same time, we have observed a boom of minilateral formats such as the Quad, the E3, the Weimar Triangle, being more or less successful depending on the purpose, with the failure of the Normandy Contact Group for instance. The escalation of the war has profoundly disrupted and reconfigured regional security arrangements both within and beyond Europe. Alongside the proliferation of alternative security formats and coalitions, processes of institutionalisation, concerning the future architecture of European defence or the reform and adaptation of NATO, remain fundamentally shaped by competing conceptions and narratives of security provision. The way in which actors conceptualise their own roles, as well as how these roles are received and perceived by others, together with the strategic narratives they advance, are therefore central to understanding security provision in a period of geopolitical interregnum.

Instead of focusing on world orders and following very much a classic international relations ambition to describe 'the actual or perceived distribution of power between and amongst states and other key actors, giving rise to a relatively stable pattern of relationships and behaviours'.⁷, this special section argues that roles and narratives are key to understanding the current transformations of security provision. Against the backdrop of various security challenges including Russia's war on Ukraine, Israel-Hamas war, as well as the conflict in Iran and current frictions in South-East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, this special section finds that fluidity and flexibility in European security provision are key in 'a moment of transition from one world order to another'.⁸

Several research aims drive the contributions to this special section. First, we analyse how global security challenges have led security providers in Europe, such as the EU, European states and NATO to mobilise new security narratives around concepts such as 'resilience', 'strategic autonomy' or 'geopolitical Europe'. These have been accompanied by new policy initiatives in the field of foreign intelligence, sanctions, defence. Second, in a context of contestation of the liberal world order we analyse how these new narratives and policy initiatives are received in other parts of the world such as Japan. Narratives of security provision are dependent not only on collective domestic identities, but also on role perception in and outside Europe. Third, European security provision has been affected by Brexit, which brought decades-long formal institutional arrangements to an abrupt end. We investigate how the collaborations were sustained nonetheless.

To address these aims, the special section provides an in-depth theory-informed account of the transformation of narratives and roles in times of crises and further what impact it had for the provision of European security in and beyond Europe. This makes a unique contribution

⁶ Mayer, Sebastian, and Dina Sharipova. "Security provision." *The EU as an Actor in Central Asia: External Impacts, Regional Responses*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024. 185-211.

⁷ Whitham, B., & Heywood, A. (2023). *Global Politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁸ By European we mean both European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom.

to a recent literature that has remained rather preoccupied by the return of geopolitics, controversies around realist propositions,⁹ China's role, and debates about EU's strategic autonomy¹⁰ but often lacking the novel data as to why and how narratives (and the role of security providers in and beyond Europe) have been transformed by these times of 'permanent emergency'.¹¹ Conceptually, we seek to further understand the link between narratives, role perceptions and the security provision in and beyond Europe. After reviewing what security provision means in times of permanent emergency and interregnum, we conceptually analyse how narratives on security provision in and beyond Europe have been requiring more fluidity. The analysis of socialisation around security provision highlights the importance of informalisation but also how social power remains important even in times of increased informality. Fourth, external perceptions by third countries, recipients of narratives on security provision, have proven to be key, and highlight the increasing agency of recipients of narratives in their success.

1. Security Provision in times of Permanent Emergency and Interregnum

This special section captures the dynamics of how narratives amongst traditional security providers in Europe such as NATO, the US, the European Union (EU) and European states have evolved in terms of understanding one's role in the provision of security and its transformation in times of permanent emergency. By permanent emergency we refer to a series of crises that have now led to permanency of transformations in modes of governance. More specifically we want to understand how various security challenges such as the conflict in Ukraine and Gaza, have impacted collective identity, through narrative and self-conception analysis. We demonstrate that the mounting challenges posed to European security have acted as enablers for transformed narratives, including those on the self-prescribed roles in global security. As narratives are relational,¹² they can also help us to identify whether there is convergence or competition with other actors. These narratives and role perceptions about European security provision are analysed through a multi-focus lens which involves security organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) affected by geopolitical upheavals but also the way the EU and the UK's roles as security providers have been reshaped, as well as how security provision is perceived outside the EU, for instance in Japan on the Indo-Pacific a new region of strategic interest. This approach deepens both the theoretical and empirical analysis of the transformation of security narratives and roles.. A central finding that runs across the contributions is that the notion of 'permanent emergency' has become a structuring condition for security provision itself: rather than a series of discrete crises to be managed and resolved, European security actors now

⁹ Edinger, H. (2022). 'Offensive ideas: structural realism, classical realism and Putin's war on Ukraine', *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 6, November, pp 1873–1893, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac217>

¹⁰ Helwig, N. (2023) EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Europe's Capacity to Act in the times of War, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13527> (online first)

¹¹ Ladi, S., & Wolff, S. (2021). The EU institutional architecture in the Covid-19 response: Coordinative Europeanization in times of permanent emergency. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(Suppl 1), 32.

¹² Tonra, B. (2011). Democratic foundations of EU foreign policy: narratives and the myth of EU exceptionalism. *Journal of European public policy*, 18(8), 1190-1207.

operate in a mode of continuous adaptation in which the interregnum is not a transitional passage to a new stable order but a durable feature of the international environment. This has important implications for how we study security provision: it shifts analytical attention from moments of decision to the ongoing processes of narration, role enactment and socialisation through which security actors continuously reproduce and revise their understanding of what they are doing and why.

2. Narratives Shifts, Socialisation and the fluidity of the European security space

The narration of security provision is deeply intertwined with the material and ideational conditions in which security actors operate. Narratives do not merely describe a situation; they constitute it, shaping the expectations, legitimacy and scope of action available to security providers. In times of interregnum, when the old certainties of a liberal world order are contested but a new order has not yet crystallised, narratives perform an especially critical function: they provide orientation, justify departures from prior commitments and construct solidarity among coalitions of like-minded actors. The articles in this special section collectively demonstrate that European security narratives have undergone a significant reorientation since 2022 — one characterised by a shift towards inward resilience, the reassertion of territorial defence logics and the gradual securitisation of domains previously considered non-military, including industrial policy, digital infrastructure and energy supply chains. This shift is neither uniform nor uncontested. As the contributions show, different institutional actors — the European Council, the European Commission, NATO, and individual member states — narrate the same security landscape through distinct, sometimes competing lenses, reflecting divergent role conceptions and institutional mandates. What unites them, however, is a common recognition that European security provision can no longer be taken for granted and must be actively constructed, communicated and defended.

The special section highlights how narratives evolve over time across organisations, between the EU and NATO, but also how we need to have a refined understanding of narratives which can sometimes be normatively contested but do not necessarily lead to an impasse. The distinction made by Hoeffler between normative and procedural narratives therefore helps to advance the conceptualisation of strategic narratives who have often been understood as ‘means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors [and] a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate’¹³

Socialisation is a useful conceptual angle to study the evolution of ‘routine practices’, also beyond the formal settings, and how time can impact entrepreneurs¹⁴ in foreign and security policy-making.¹⁵ If we concede that security provision is, among others, dependent on shared norms and understandings, then processes of socialisation are crucial in order to facilitate

¹³ p.2 Miskimmon, A., O'loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2014). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge.

¹⁴ Barges, P., Joseph, J. and A. E. Juncos (2026). This special section

¹⁵ Hom, A. and Ryan Beasley (2021), ‘Constructing time in foreign policy-making: Brexit's timing entrepreneurs, malcontemps and apparatchiks’, *International Affairs*, 97(2), March 2021, Pages 267–285, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa162>

these conditions. In the era when multilateralism is challenged, formal organisations may be replaced by informal venues where actors come together. This may lead to internalisation of common narratives, several of which are discussed in this special section.

While a lot has been written on the diplomatic impact of Brexit¹⁶ or even what could happen in venues such as the United Nations,¹⁷ our special section brings some novel data following Russia's war on Ukraine. Discussions on narratives and concepts such as resilience or global Britain have a direct strategic value at times of strategic momentum for the EU-UK relations. Beyond Brexit this special section shows strengthening of ties between the EU and the UK, a revival of Franco-British relationship around an ambition to deliver security globally and evolutions of the socialisation of European security actors. In particular we explore how these transformations affect the informal hierarchies in practices of every-day international security.¹⁸

The articles in the special section show how security provisions reach beyond formal institutional arrangement. We see, for example, how informal venues provided context for socialisation after Brexit, which ensured the ongoing co-operation in the case of sanctions (article by Lovato). Similarly, Frigo's network analysis reveals how the UK's departure from formal EU structures did not sever its intelligence relationships but transformed them, redistributing 'social power' across the network and highlighting the ongoing importance of bilateral channels as vehicles for socialisation. These findings collectively underscore a broader theoretical point: that socialisation is not simply a function of formal membership but can persist, adapt and even deepen through informal and bilateral mechanisms, particularly when shared security threats generate powerful incentives for continued cooperation.

3. External Perceptions of the EU as security provider: the UK and Japan

External role perceptions are also central to this special issue, as it engages with the question of how the (self-perceived) roles of European security providers, such as the EU and the UK, have changed due to the recent crises in different regions of the world. We also adopt a decentring perspective, whereby external perceptions of European narratives are also studied. The evolution of security roles, can indeed be prescribed or perceived¹⁹ and have been particularly visible in the evolution of perceptions of the EU by Japanese experts when it comes to the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific highlighted by Bacon and Julsrud.

When it comes to the UK, all the articles in this special section provide novel data on how security cooperation can continue when there is 'institutional and normative disintegration'²⁰ in the case of the UK's withdrawal from formal structures of cooperation. More importantly we

¹⁶ Whitman, R. G. (2019). 'The UK's European diplomatic strategy for Brexit and beyond', *International Affairs*, 95(2), 383–404

¹⁷ Giffkins, J., S. Jarvis, J. Ralph (2019). 'Brexit and the UN Security Council: declining British influence?', *International Affairs*, 95 (6), pp. 1349–1368, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz205>

¹⁸ Pouliot, V. (2016) Hierarchy in practice: Multilateral diplomacy and the governance of international security, *European Journal of International Security*, 1(1), 5-26.

¹⁹ Juncos, A.E. & K. Pomorska (2021) Contesting procedural norms: the impact of politicisation on European foreign policy cooperation, *European Security*, 30:3, 367-384,

²⁰ Driedger, J. (2021). Bilateral defence and security cooperation despite disintegration: Does the Brexit process divide the United Kingdom and Germany on Russia? *European Journal of International Security*, 6(1), 86-108. doi:10.1017/eis.2020.18

acknowledge an increased fluidity and flexibility in European security provision due to the diversity of transformative processes. These are liminal times, where various new processes have emerged in terms of defence, intelligence and in weapons' delivery, in particular towards Ukraine, and in the adaptation of sanctions, which mobilise transformations inside the EU, within the coordination with the UK, but also with the multilateral organisations such as NATO. One structural feature that is highlighted by our contributors is the role of bilateralism as a key referent for security provision, beyond regional approaches, such as in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly in the UK we see that bilateralism is 'an essential channel for intelligence cooperation'.²¹ This confirms related research that has shown that bilateralism is an essential mechanism for continued socialisation with the EU for the UK.²²

4. Organization of the special section

This special section features five articles, which all address the challenge of security provision in and beyond Europe, by asking how security narratives, role perceptions and socialisation dynamics have been transformed by the era of permanent emergency. Together, they provide a comparative, multi-level and empirically grounded account of the changing landscape of European security provision, drawing on original data from elite interviews, narrative analysis, network analysis and document analysis. In a departure from conventional assessment of efficiency of security provision and balance of power, this special section instead proposes to study security provision in times of inter-regnum by attending to the meanings actors attach to their actions, the stories they tell about threat and solidarity, and the ways in which these stories are received, contested or appropriated by others. The five articles proceed as follows.

Pol Bargués, Jonathan Joseph and Ana Juncos explore the transformation of EU and NATO security narratives. Their analysis provides insights into the transformation of strategic narratives of European security by NATO and the EU. Although resilience was originally interpreted quite differently, the multiplication of crises, in particular the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have led to a convergence of resilience narratives in both NATO and the EU. Although resilience was originally interpreted quite differently across institutions, the multiplication of crises — in particular the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine — has led to a convergence of resilience narratives in both NATO and the EU. Starting from the view that current EU and NATO narratives of security provision are under strain, they identify a narrative shift from one of 'perpetual peace' to one of 'resilience'. Starting from the view that current EU and NATO narratives of security provision are under strain, they identify a narrative shift from one of 'perpetual peace' to one of 'resilience'. This shift has been made possible due to 'external shocks and narrative entrepreneurs'.²³ The role of context and agency are thus central to understand how narratives around EU and NATO security provision have evolved. In the case of the EU, the concept of resilience itself has been transformed moving from a more positive worldview of the EU where it had arrived to an 'age of maturity'²⁴ towards a more 'defensive and inward-looking' understanding of resilience. In the case of

²¹ Frigo, L. 2026 Ibid, pXX

²² Wolff, S., Carrapico, H., & Piquet, A. (2026). Out of sight, out of mind? UK–EU member states bilateralism as an enabler of Europeanisation. *JCMS: journal of common market studies*, 64(1), 387-412.

²³ Hoeffler, C. (2026).

²⁴ Riddervold, Marianne, and Pernille Rieker. "Finally coming of age? EU foreign and security policy after Ukraine." *European security* 33.3 (2024): 497-516.

NATO, its resilience narrative was not linked to peace but rather to deterrence, military alliance and the liberal world order narrative. The authors highlight that in terms of building, enunciation and reception of security provision narrative, the EU and NATO have different departure points: 'NATO's is from a military narrative to one that encompasses citizens while the EU's journey is from a citizens' narrative to one that encompasses security and defence'.²⁵ Convergence between both organisations is happening nonetheless on the 'whole of society approach' especially in the realisation that the security provision is not mostly abroad but should be strengthened at home, in the EU. The authors explain this shift by the growing uncertainty that prevails in security provision narratives. NATO seems to be more attuned to deal with geopolitical uncertainties while the EU still needs to move from a narrative of peace that prevailed for so long on the content to a narrative of European resilience, which involves a 'total defence approach' where society has a role to play.²⁶

Building on the debate of strategic autonomy, Catherine Hoeffler explores the dual politics of EU autonomy narratives in the fields of defence, economics and digital policy. She starts from the puzzle that in spite of an evolution of narratives on strategic autonomy, the EU tends to have a geopolitical language that is fragmented across policy issues. She makes a distinction between a normative dimension, i.e. 'what autonomy means, and why the EU should pursue it' from its procedural dimension which 'concerns how autonomy is operationalised in concrete instruments and strategies and with what implications'.²⁷ Policy change therefore can happen in the short-term if there is an alignment on the operationalisation of the autonomy even though in the long-term vagueness can remain on the normative dimension. Narratives can be instrumental in the short-term timeline of security provision. However, they can only be fully successful when third parties and recipients of security provision are receptive to it. Recipients therefore play an active role in the success or not of narratives about security provision. Illustrating this through case studies, she shows that in spite of a normative dissensus on EU's strategic autonomy in security and defence, the EU has been able to move forward by regulating and adopting new instruments since the War in Ukraine that have empowered a 'Sovereign Union narrative' whereby autonomy is defined as greater self-sufficiency through the adoption of instruments such as the European defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA). Similarly in the field of digital sovereignty, while European Commissioners diverge normatively on whether to see the EU as mostly supporting national levels, a vision led by Commissioner Vestager, Commissioner Breton has framed the issue mostly as 'one of security and resilience for the EU'.²⁸ A discrepancy that could again be solved by the adoption of new EU regulatory instruments that have enabled the EU to cope with normative disagreements.

Marianna Lovato examines how voluntary withdrawal from an International Organization (IO) affects subsequent cooperation between the exiting state and remaining members, using UK–EU sanction negotiations before and after Brexit as a comparative case. Drawing on elite interviews with diplomats and EU officials who had first-hand knowledge of the 2014 and 2022 Russia sanction negotiations, she traces the transformation of the UK's role against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Her central finding is that, contrary to initial expectations, Brexit did not fundamentally obstruct UK–EU27 cooperation on Ukraine

²⁵ Hoeffler, C. (2026) Ibid, p. X

²⁶ Bargués, P., Joseph, J. and A. E. Juncos (2026). The transformation of EU and NATO security narratives: Towards resilience and total defence? *International Affairs*, this special section.

²⁷ Hoeffler, C. this special section.

²⁸ Hoeffler, C. this special section.

sanctions. The key to this outcome, she argues, is informality: converging security interests and a set of pre-existing and newly created informal channels, including the G7 Plus contact group on sanctions, bilateral attaché networks and multilateral enforcement forums such as the Sanctions Coordinators Forum and the Russian Elites, Proxies and Oligarchs Taskforce, allowed cooperation to continue outside the formal architecture of EU membership. Operating through these venues, the UK retained meaningful social influence, acting as agenda-setter, broker and status-maximiser, and its authority was further bolstered by the vindication of British (and American) pre-invasion intelligence assessments, which had been dismissed by many EU partners. Nevertheless, Lovato underscores the clear limits of informality: without access to formal Council decision-making, the UK can no longer shape EU sanctions from the earliest stages of negotiation. Its influence is narrower in scope and concentrated on the Ukraine file alone, and its ability to act as intermediary between Washington and the EU has been significantly diminished. The article thus offers a cautionary account of voluntary IO withdrawal, showing that while informal channels can compensate for the loss of formal membership, they cannot replicate the density, frequency or direct decision-making power that institutionalised cooperation once afforded. The costs of that loss falls predominantly on the exiting state rather than on the IO itself.

Taking an outside-in perspective, Paul Bacon and Axel Julsrud explore how the role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific is perceived by Japanese experts. Adopting a decentring perspective they argue that actors such as Japan are not passive recipients of EU security provision but ‘an agent in its own right.’²⁹ They find that Japanese experts are more receptive to the EU’s narratives in the fields of economic and maritime security where they would like to see a ‘desirable role’ for the EU. Yet, at the same time they realise that there is a low credibility for the EU to be a provider on these issues. When it comes to economic security, Japanese practitioners see the EU’s narrative projection as mixed. Although there is significant attention being paid to it in policy circles, there are gaps in the narrative reception which questions the quality of communication. The authors also highlight the importance of the bilateral relationship which is where the EU has more leverage than on the regional dimension of the Indo-Pacific. The main theoretical contribution of the article is the theorisation of reception as a key element of narrative success.

Finally, Lucia Frigo explores the evolution of intelligence sharing between the EU and the UK through the case studies of Brexit and the war in Ukraine asking how the UK position in the EU’s intelligence framework has changed in response to Brexit and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It also investigates the extent to which this impacts European security. Drawing from network analysis she finds that post-Brexit the UK’s influence is one of ‘curtailed networked power’.³⁰ The UK agency in intelligence security provision has been weakened. Through a study of the national and EU and European intelligence nodes, Frigo establishes ties defined as ‘any channel through which two nodes transmit either strategic intelligence of foreign threats (intelligence products) or knowledge regarding intelligence activities (expert knowledge)’.³¹ In other words the network analysis enables us to understand socialisation

²⁹ Bacon, P. and A. Julsrud (2026). Perception gaps and Japanese expert reception of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategic narrative. *International Affairs*, this special section

³⁰ Frigo, L. (2026). There is only so much you can do from the outside’: the EU-British intelligence sharing through Brexit and war in Ukraine. *International Affairs*, this special section

³¹ Frigo, L. (2026) Ibi: p. XX this special section

through knowledge exchanges. More importantly, it measures . the extent to which the UK has lost 'social power' in intelligence security provision, which is most noticeable before Russia's attack on Ukraine where the UK's assessment of a potential attack did not influence EU's position. Like for the case of Japan, Frigo reminds us that bilateralism remains an important mechanism for socialisation.

To conclude, what these articles reveal is that socialisation is even more important in informal venues. The erratic insecurity generated by Trump's decisions on Iran, Venezuela and Gaza has brought the EU and the UK closer together and rendered them more effective on issues such as sanctions policy towards Russia than they might ever have been within the formal structures of EU cooperation..³² Yet, informality alone cannot be sufficient for the 'social power' which has been important in the field of intelligence-sharing.³³ Bilateralism is the mechanism that gathers both this informal and formal quality and is central to advance security provision in and beyond Europe. In order to understand if policy change can take place within security provision, it is important to analyse the formulation of narratives for security providers, but also how they are being received by other actors, often recipients of security provision. Thus, interregnum times have pushed the multiplication of narratives about autonomy.

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³² Lovato, M. this special section.

³³ Frigo, L. this special section.

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